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CHAPTER 1

Dr. Gerald Hane opened his eyes as if waking from a long, necessary nap. For a few seconds the world lodged itself like a slow photograph behind his lids. He tasted dust and the faint iron of old blood, and remembered, with the blunt precision of habit, the weight of the suit he had insisted on wearing at home, because Sarah liked it when he wore a suit at dinner.

He sat up and the world surprised him by being too large. Blades of grass leaned like green fencing against his chest when he rose, taller than a hip and brushing the lapel of his jacket. The suit felt wrong on a sixteen year old body, the jacket sleeves long and the trousers cut for a man who had never needed them before. He stood half-ashamed and half-amused, hands running the fabric of a life he had packed into memory.

He had expected cold. He had expected the quiet of an end. Instead the air was full of small noises, the steady whisper of leaves, the distant suggestion of running water. Sun braided through the canopy in sharp, vertical lines. It warmed his scalp in a way that belonged to the living, not the dying.

Gerald checked himself the way a scientist checks an experiment: methodical, searching for variables. Bone, muscle, breath, heartbeat. All answered in a rhythm that was young and too quick to belong to him by right. He pressed a palm against his chest and felt a pulse that did not carry the long echo of years. His fingers trembled with the small, disorienting thrill of movement.

Memory settled like dust in the corners of his mind. Years in the lab, the late nights, the formula that had promised reprieve from the end. The awards and the plaques, the interviews. The children of relatives, the money sent to secure an education, the shares given to his granddaughter so she would not be left to want. Then the failures, the bodies that had not lived the way he had promised, the funerals that had hollowed his practice of meaning. He had folded his hands around those losses and learned to let them be present without moving them.

He had given the work away and set the rest aside. He had told himself he would die with the knowledge he had and no more. He had even rehearsed the calmness of acceptance. Death had been a patient thing in his plans. He had accepted it like a last appointment he could not cancel.

Now his breath came too fast, small intrusions of panic under the scalp of his composure. He felt foolish and ruined and strangely delighted. He wanted to laugh and he wanted to weep. The suit, the sun, the tall grass, the youth of his hands: they all combined into a single, ridiculous fact. He was alive, young enough to begin again, and already trapped inside a body that was not his.

A voice came, so soft it might have been the thought of air leaving the leaves. It was not a voice he recognised from life. It did not sound like a person at all. It nested in the space behind his teeth and in the place where ideas settled. It said a single thing, not in sentences but in the tone of a bell that rings clear and ends.

Instant master, it breathed, made aware.

Gerald listened, because he had spent his life listening for signals in noise. The phrase arrived with no explanation, like a label on an object without a manual. He suspected, with the stubborn rationality of the lab, that some neurological misfiring or postmortem dream architecture had produced it. He tried to assign it an origin: auditory cortex, limbic, a memory echo. None of those explanations felt adequate.

He did not feel magic as other men might have thought to name it. He felt, instead, the quiet permission of a door opened. The words sat in him like a key might sit in the palm. They told him something had changed about his faculties. They did not tell him what to do with that change.

He spoke out loud to test the sound of his voice. The syllables surprised him by being lighter than he remembered, the consonants sharp where age had rounded them. He said the first thing that occurred to him. The word left his mouth and fell into the grass.

"Gulliver," he said, because his library had always been a thankless place for comfort, because he had read to himself and to Sarah in the evenings when their home held other people’s laughter. Gulliver, because the thought of giants and smallness had lodged in him once as a child reading travel narratives. Not that anyone had expected giants here. The memory was a small defiant proof that he had been a reader once.

He tried to form a reasoning for the tall grass, for the forest that knit itself higher and hung leaves like flags. He took a step and felt the ground give, the way a garden might if roots were used to harbor deep life. A faint scent of something like resin, then another like old paper and dust. There was no trace of asphalt, no sign of concrete, no tin of human geometry. If this had been a dream that mimicked an old field behind his childhood house, it did so with the diligence of a cartographer without other instructions.

He tightened his hands into fists, one of them brushing the soft leather of the jacket. The suit could be sold later for a pair of coins if he needed them. He had planned contingencies for the legal transfers, the meetings to ensure his granddaughter would never be without means. Even now his mind functioned on economy. Contracts had always been easier to think about than people had been.

A small bird—if that was what it was—uncoiled a series of notes from somewhere above. The sound was bright and quick, as if the bird had no patience for long phrases. Gerald listened and realised that his body catalogued the sound differently now; hearing no longer simply registered, it sorted and filed and attached likelihoods. The scientist in him, many years removed, reached for tools he no longer wore.

He tested motion. He reached for a blade of grass and tugged. It came free with effort. He realized that, though young, his hands retained the tremor of old experiments, the finesse that once arranged tiny pipettes and measured drops while the world burned around him. Strength without experience. The thought made him both proud and afraid.

If there had been any cruelty to this transformation, it was that memory was intact. He remembered the names of those who had died by the promise of his formula. He remembered the exact shape of the coffin that had seemed too small at the time, and the way his granddaughter had put a coin into the hand of a widow. He remembered Sarah’s hands on his shoulder the night

he took his prize, and how she had smiled and said the word he had written into the margins of grant requests: live.

He sat down on the damp earth and watched a line of beetles march along a fallen branch. He let the reality of his misdeeds press against him. Confession might have been the action that made him less a man, or it might have been the only action that could make him human again. He had told the public that the potion required more development, more tests. The press had called it a triumph because the potion extended lives when it worked. To the world his reputation remained a bright, irreproachable line. To the world he had been an architect of hope.

Alone with grass and small birds, the architecture of hope looked like scaffolding left to rot. He had paid for his granddaughter’s shares and invested away his guilt in a way that had the pleasing clarity of a ledger entry. That clarity no longer satisfied something inside him that required a different kind of balance.

He had to move, and the movement arrived as a resolve that did not beg for permission. He rose, felt the suit snag on a bramble and straighten, and began to walk toward where the canopy opened. The forest allowed only diffused paths. His steps pushed through the tall stems and the grass sighed against his calves. He kept his head low, because tall plants make unfamiliar braiding of light and shade that can disorient.

He noticed small things that would have meant little to a younger man. The way the dew clung to spider silk like tiny lamps. The pattern where sunlight folded over a moss bank and threw shadows shaped like fingers. He judged distances with an old habit, the same measure that once let him gauge the volume of a phial by looking at the surface tension of a droplet. There was a practical sense that in this place his scientific instinct was a compass.

The whisper returned, softer now, and this time not a phrase but a suggestion that the faculty within him could be learned and used. He wanted to shout, to ask what that faculty would mean, to demand the name for breathing technique so he could reduce it to catechism and diagram. The word technique meant an ordered set of actions, a recipe; breathing, though, was not a word he could place with the categories on his shelf. The voice offered nothing but the inkling of potential.

He spoke aloud in the dry, economical voice he had used at meetings. "Who are you?" he asked the forest, and the question tasted like the word for inquiry he had used at symposiums. It felt formal and useless. No human voice answered. The leaves continued their indifferent conversation.

When the sun reached a higher angle, the forest became less cathedral and more field. Trees thinned. He walked until the ground sloped gently. His calves burned in a way that told him his muscles were learning the body's new geometry, a lesson of weight and leverage. He paused beside an enormous fern that arched like a green cathedral pew and imagined Sarah's hands smoothing the lapel of his jacket the way she had smoothed the tablecloth before a guest arrived.

The recollection steadied him. He touched the ring he had once worn, a thin band cherished and kept. It would not fit his new finger, and he almost laughed at the ridiculousness of mourning the loss of a ring he no longer wore. He thought of the way she had liked him in a suit and

wondered, with a small and sharp sorrow, whether she would recognise him. That thought pushed him forward like a shove.

He kept walking until the scent of something beyond the trees reached him, a note of damp earth that suggested a stream. Every logical fibre inside him preferred the arithmetic of resources: water first, then shelter, then study. He moved toward the wetness because he trusted the logic of thirst above the unreliable call of curiosity.

By the time he stepped through the last fringe of tall grass into a hollow, he felt the peculiar steadiness that comes from an older habit of functionality. He had not yet the language for the power the voice had offered him, but he could catalogue what survival required. He could measure and ration and mend until he found what he needed.

He set himself a small and necessary plan. Find water. Bandage any tears in the suit to preserve its marketable value. Keep warm. Avoid large animals. Avoid being arrogant with hunger or hope. The plan had the simplicity of a ledger entry.

The plan was barely formed when a flutter of movement at the edge of his field of view arrested him. Leaves parted like a curtain and nothing emerged but the suggestion of a track, a crushed line through the grass that might have been the passage of a creature or the path of another human. He lifted his hand as if to reach for the track and then dropped it. He did not want the first motion he made in this new life to be one of rashness.

He did not tell himself that he could return to the laboratory and his books and simply be Gerald Hale again. He did not hope for the law of measurement to correct itself and restore the world to the neat rows of his career. He had been wrong before about what science could do for the world. He had misread chaos as experiment.

He walked on.

His clothes were stiff with the morning humidity. He walked with the small steadiness of a man who knows the calculus of living. He did not sing. He did not speak the whisper's name aloud to give it substance. He folded his hands into his pockets the way an old man does when he wants to feel the shape of coins he no longer needs. He kept the suit collar up because Sarah liked the silhouette and because a habit is sometimes the only human architecture left when everything else collapses.

The path narrowed and then widened again. He found nothing else but tracks of small mammals and the distinct furrows left by the passage of a larger creature somewhere deeper in the forest. He felt his heart take a measure of his fear and then locate it exactly. There would be danger ahead. There would be strangers. He might be small in this world as in Gulliver's story, or he might be the giant in someone else's tale. The thought was not comic.

He told himself, in a voice that felt like a ledger and a prayer combined, that he would move forward without frivolity. He would learn what he needed to learn. He would safeguard what he had left. Above all, he would not squander this odd, improbable reprieve.

When the sun finally dropped behind a shoulder of trees and the light flattened into gold, Gerald stepped into a slightly lower opening and stopped. The air moved like a curtain. He watched the

grass wave and listened to the small birds finish their conversations. He tasted the last of the day on his tongue and did not flinch from it.

He had been given a phrase in a voice without a face. He had been given a body that carried wrongness and possibility in equal measure. He had lost and he had been given a chance. He folded both things into himself and let them be two weights he could carry.

Then, with the quiet of someone who has rehearsed a proper exit at great length, he shouldered his jacket and walked toward wherever the path would allow. He walked into the tall green because walking was the only proof he could make of his intention to live.

He did not run. He did not shout. He moved with the small dignity of an old man who had the use of a young body and the memory of what it cost to be wrong. The first night would be for water and shelter and the preservation of his suit. The first morning beyond that would be for learning what the whisper had meant.

He stepped into the grass and, for the first time since the whisper, felt the notion of mastery take a contour. It was not a promise of answers. It was an opening. He walked until the trees thickened and the dark leaned forward like an audience. He walked and thought of Sarah, and for the first time in many years, he allowed himself to hope that the next thing he did could be for someone other than the ledger of his regret.

CHAPTER 2

The forest greeted Gerald with a quiet that felt too clean for a place this wild. Birds did not chirp. Leaves did not rustle. Even the wind held its breath. He walked with careful steps, palms brushing aside reeds thicker than his arms. The scale of the plants made every movement feel like trespassing.

A low crackle reached him from the brush. He paused. The sound traveled through the ground before it reached his ears. Something heavy pressed the soil.

He stepped back and steadied his breath. There was no fear on his face, only a tightening around the eyes. He watched the direction of the sound, jaw firm, fingers curling slightly.

The trees parted.

A wolf stepped into view. Its shoulder came to the height of four meters. Blue fur shimmered faintly, as if reflecting light that was not present. Each breath from the beast rolled out in warm vapor.

Gerald froze.

The wolf lowered its head. Its nostrils flared. Its gaze locked onto him with the cold certainty of a predator that did not question its hunt.

Gerald turned and ran.

No scream escaped him. No frantic flailing. He pressed forward with calm desperation, arms pumping in controlled arcs. Grass tore around his legs. His breath quickened but did not break.

The ground trembled behind him. The wolf closed the distance with terrible efficiency. A single leap covered several paces. The next leap closed the gap completely.

One final impact struck him from behind. His body skidded through soil and leaves. A sharp stone tore into his thigh. Pain finally reached him and stiffened his breath.

He attempted to rise. His left leg gave out. The wolf approached again, its chest expanding with a deep inhalation. The sound resembled a bellows, slow and certain.

Gerald looked up at the sky, lips pressed into a thin line. He pushed his palm against the ground to sit upright. His hand trembled under the weight of his injury. Blood soaked the grass around him.

Branches snapped somewhere behind the wolf.

The beast turned its head.

A figure stepped out of the brush. A tall man. A long wooden spear rested across his shoulder. His body carried a weight that was not visible on the surface but felt through the steady firmness of his stance. Vital power rolled off him like quiet breath under sunlight.

The hunter did not shout. His expression did not twist. His eyes were earnest and steady, observing both wolf and wounded boy.

He lifted the spear slightly. His fingers pressed against the wood in a slow rhythm. Something stirred in the grain of the weapon. The spear grew rigid, alive with breath that seeped through every fiber.

The wolf bared its teeth.

The hunter stepped forward.

He shifted his weight onto his back leg, drew in a slow breath, and threw the spear.

The weapon cut through the air without wobble. It did not whistle. It did not hum. It moved with the silence of something guided by purpose alone.

The spear struck the wolf through the side of its skull. The point forced its way in with a muted, sickening crack. The beast fell before its body realized death had come for it.

The hunter exhaled once, long and controlled, as if releasing tension from a single muscle.

He walked to the corpse and retrieved his spear. The weapon came free reluctantly. He rubbed the broken grain near the tip, frowning in mild disappointment.

“These wolves grow tougher each year.” His tone was quiet, as though speaking to the forest instead of Gerald.

He turned to Gerald..

The hunter’s eyes softened. He crouched beside him and examined the injury with slow, practiced movements. His breath remained calm, steady, never rushed.

“You are lucky the beast did not bite,” he said. “You would not be speaking if it had.”

Gerald looked straight at him. His jaw tightened as another wave of pain moved through his leg. Sweat collected on his brow, yet he uttered no complaint.

The hunter placed two fingers on the torn skin. Gerald clenched his teeth but did not pull away. The hunter nodded faintly, as if approving the boy’s restraint.

“You walk so lightly that the wolf mistook you for prey. Do you come from the village?” the hunter asked.

Gerald shook his head once.

The man studied him again, eyes narrowing slightly.

“Your breathing is strange. Calm for someone this wounded. That is good. Keep it steady.”

Gerald tried to lift himself using his elbows. His body trembled. The hunter pressed a firm hand on his shoulder, signaling him to stay down.

“You will not walk like this.” His voice held the weight of certainty rather than scolding. “I will carry you.”

The hunter lifted Gerald onto his back. The movement was fluid. The boy’s weight did not bend his posture. Even the air around him felt steadier, as if the forest rhythm responded to his presence.

Gerald watched the wolf’s corpse as they walked away. The spear wound was neat and complete, a straight line through skull and bone. No steel could have pierced that hide without shattering. No iron blade could have done that with such clean finality.

The hunter tightened his grip on Gerald’s legs to keep him secure.

“My name is Kael,” he said while walking toward the distant village.

“Gerald,” the boy replied.

Kael gave a faint nod, acknowledging the name.

“We will get you treated,” he said. His tone held a quiet firmness that felt safer than any promise. “After that, you and I will decide how you want to live in this land.”

They continued forward. The forest, which had felt vast and empty, seemed to settle around them. Gerald rested his head against Kael’s shoulder, not from weakness alone but from a wordless trust in the strength carrying him.

CHAPTER 3

He woke hard, as if dragged upward by the back of his skull. Light from a narrow window scraped across the room and drew lines on the floor. He inhaled once and held the air in his chest to test his ribs.

Left leg: no response.

He tried again, isolating each muscle the way he once isolated a nerve cluster in a cadaver. Quadriceps: partial contraction. Hamstring: none. Hip flexor: inconsistent. Pain radiated in a straight bar up to the groin.

Not a clean break. A crack.

He lowered the breath in increments, counting the beats in his head. One. Two. Three. On the fourth, the pain sharpened. He clenched his fingers against the pallet. The wood creaked. The pain was information. Good.

He sat upright by leaning on his elbows. He scanned the room: single table, clay bowl, patched roof, hunter's tools on a wall peg. No caretaker. No voices.

Alone.

He looked for a crutch. None. Looked for water. A half-filled jug. Looked for food. Nothing.

A day can begin well. This one did not.

He adjusted the splint on his thigh. The pressure made his jaw clamp shut. A low grunt escaped, more breath than sound. He hated that. In his youth he had trained to stop reflex noise: bite the molars, exhale slow, do not give pain a voice. Now his control was compromised.

He forced himself still until the tremor in his fingers settled.

A door hinge moved. Heavy steps approached. The man from the forest entered—the hunter's chief, taller up close than he had appeared by the spear throw.

The man didn't greet him. He stopped at the foot of the pallet and studied Gerald the way a butcher studies a cut of meat: checking weight, density, and whether it would spoil soon.

"You are awake," he said. "Good. Saves time."

The chief dragged a stool beside the pallet and sat. The stool groaned under him.

"You should know your position," he said. "Food is low this month. Winter storms damaged half the grain storage. A stranger who cannot walk is a mouth added to our problem."

Gerald did not flinch. He adjusted the bandage on his thigh with two fingers, watching the blood seep through a spot near the edge.

"I can pay," Gerald said.

“With what?”

He reached beneath the blanket, pulled out the folded suit jacket he had kept near his side. The fabric was creased, streaked with dried mud. He held it out.

“Sell this. Keep one button for me.”

The chief took the jacket, tested the fabric between calloused fingers, then nodded once.

“Fine. But coin will not make your leg work. And if a noble patrol crosses this area, they will ask why we are hiding a runaway.”

Gerald looked at him sharply.

“I am not a runaway..”

“A poor lie,” the chief said. “Nobles do use boys for marriage bargaining. Your fear was the right shape as you are pretty good looking with such a fine skin and shape. But without your family, you are nothing here.”

“Will the patrol come here?”

“Five days. They pass through our ridge to reach the northern ponds. They count bodies. They ask names. They take what they want. A lad like you is their favorite target, unless you register under this village and permanently lose your city residency identity. Even then. It will take time before the village might support you.”

Gerald’s jaw tightened. Good. He had to establish himself sooner.

The chief stood and picked up a clay cup. He placed it beside Gerald.

“You will hide in the smokehouse until they leave. Until then, you earn your stay. We have a sick cow behind the barn. Fever, swelling along the jaw, difficulty chewing. Our healer failed.”

That was enough explanation for Gerald. He didn’t ask permission. He placed both hands on the pallet and pushed himself upright. His leg screamed. He bared his teeth and exhaled slow. He shifted weight onto his right leg, balanced, then nodded.

“Help me outside.”

The chief offered his arm. Gerald took it without pride. They walked with short, stiff movements to the barn.

Inside, a cow lay on its side. Saliva pooled under its mouth. Its breathing was thick, rattling like fluid trapped in the throat. Gerald crouched by dropping his good leg forward and lowering himself with controlled descent. His fingers pressed lightly along the jaw. Hard swelling on both sides. Hot skin. Breath sour with infection.

Lymph node infection. Possibly tooth rot. Possibly grass mold producing toxin.

He ran his palm along the cow’s neck, feeling for irregular heat. He glanced around the barn.

“Where do you keep salt?”

The chief pointed to a barrel.

“Boil water,” Gerald said. “I need one bowl. I need clean cloth. And I need a sharp knife that you can afford to ruin.”

The chief left without question. When he returned with the items, Gerald worked.

He cleaned the knife with boiled water. Pressed fingers until he found the abscess point. Drove the knife in with one firm thrust. Pus erupted. The smell was harsh and immediate. He did not blink. He pressed the sides with both thumbs until the gland drained.

He washed the cut with salt water twice.

The chief watched, breathing slow.

“It will eat again in two days,” Gerald said. “If not, open the cut again.”

The chief nodded once, sharp, like he had just weighed Gerald’s value on a scale and found the number acceptable.

“You stay,” the chief said. “Until your leg is stable or until the patrol passes. Whichever comes first. Kael will bring you food. You will not take more than your share.”

Gerald accepted the terms. Negotiation was pointless. Survival was math.

They returned to the hut. The chief set the suit aside.

“About breathing,” the chief said. “Kael told me your leg will not heal without rhythm. You choose a technique and I send someone to teach it.”

“I choose earthworm.”

The chief’s brows twitched once. Not approval. Consideration.

“Slow breath. Deep circulation. Long recovery. Weak future. Only saints master such fancy techniques of insects as it is hard to observe. Even if you find one can you do it. Most choose insects with trait. Not some Earthworm.” His tone was clinical. “You accept that?”

“Yes.”

The chief grunted. “I will try to find some earthworms. Never might find any. Although ordinary breathing technique only increases speed of healing, it is better than wasting a lifetime on some illusionary technique by observing a small insect.”

The chief left.

Minutes later, Kael entered with a bowl of grain porridge and a small wooden stick.

“Bite this,” Kael said.

Gerald took the stick between his molars. Kael gripped Gerald's thigh, pressed along the fracture, and reset the alignment in one movement. Gerald's breath exploded through his nose. Sweat broke across his forehead. The stick cracked between his teeth.

Kael wiped his hands on a cloth.

"You'll limp forever," Kael said. "Even with worm breath. Nerves are damaged. Bone knit will be irregular."

Gerald spat out the broken stick. "Not a problem."

"It will be one when you try to run."

"I won't run."

Kael watched him for a long moment.

"Good," he said.

Gerald thought of his instant mastery skill. If mastery was about mastering a breathing technique, he had to know if he had to observe one. He remembered the axolotl salamander which he had only seen a few times. They could even regrow spines and nerves, let alone muscles. He tried to call upon that power and he found that he had mastered the rhythm. He simply felt it. As he found that he had naturally learnt that rhythm and his body had begun to passively use it, he took a deep breath once. His body felt energized. A deep smile hung on his face. On the second breath he felt his body lighter. On his third breath, he felt his body tingle in irritation which he hoped to be healing.

Then it hit him.

His thigh throbbed in pulses. Each pulse lined up with the breath he took. He counted the beats without thinking. One. Two. Pain. One. Two. Pain. The cycle held.

Kael who had entered the room to see whom he had saved watched the change on his face.

"It worked," Kael said.

"Yes."

"You feel the weakness?"

"Yes."

"You regret it?"

"No."

Kael nodded. He set the porridge at Gerald's side.

"Eat. From tomorrow you do your share of work. Light tasks. Sorting herbs. Splitting reeds. Anything that does not need legs."

Gerald picked up the bowl and ate. The porridge was bland. He ate fast. Fuel mattered more than taste.

Kael rose to leave. At the door he paused.

“The wolf you saw had a mate,” Kael said. “Tracks were fresh this morning. It is near the ridge. It is better to not stay near the forest..”

Gerald nodded. Information good. Threat present.

Kael left.

Gerald reached for the jacket the chief had left on the stool. He tore off one button—small, metal, worn smooth. He placed it inside the cracked wooden box near his pallet.

He sold the rest at midday.

The merchant weighed the cloth with narrow eyes and offered five iron tokens and a bag of rice. Gerald calculated quickly: rice enough for eight days if rationed, longer if supplemented with broth.

He limped back to the hut with Kael’s arm supporting him only when the ground dipped sharply.

For the next two days the village asked for more than gratitude. They came to him with small requests.

A child with a rash. Gerald recognized fungal irritation and told them to dry the clothing near a fire before wearing it again.

A man with a swollen finger. Gerald drained the pocket of fluid with a heated needle.

A woman with mold in her grain. Gerald taught her how to spread the grain on flat stone and sun-dry it to halt the rot.

Each time he answered with short, precise instructions. No softness. No tales. No self-pity. And each time the villagers watched him with the alert, hungry look of people measuring what he was worth.

By the third night his leg ached in predictable intervals. The earthworm breath had begun its work, but the nerve response remained irregular. Permanent damage. He knew the pattern intimately; he had seen it in trauma patients decades ago. He flexed the toes. The big toe responded. The second did not. That would never return.

Good. A limitation is a boundary. Boundaries define workable space.

He continued breathing.

Day four brought the first howl from the ridge. Kael stood outside the hut with spear in hand, listening to the wind carry the sound.

“Mate is close,” Kael said. “It smells the blood that was spilled. Tonight we keep watch.”

That night, the village did not sleep. Children were moved into the storage house. Fires kept low. Men with spears lined the path. Gerald lay on his pallet counting breaths, counting the distant growls, counting the time until the noble patrol's arrival.

Next day he found the wolf dead as Kate was indeed the strongest.

The chief entered, face drawn tight.

"Patrol," he said. "You go to the smokehouse. Now."

Gerald rose with Kael's help. His leg shook but did not buckle. The nerve pain flashed once. He ignored it.

They moved him behind the butcher shed, into the narrow smokehouse. Dried meat hung from the rafters. The air smelled of salt and old blood.

"Stay silent," Kael said. "If they ask about you, we say nothing."

Gerald pressed himself against the wall, controlling his breath to the low, flat pattern of the worm. Slow. Minimal.

Voices approached the barn. Then hooves stopped.

For the first time since waking in this world, he felt his pulse accelerate. Not fear. Calculation.

Time, breath, risk, cost.

That was all.

Chapter 4

The light had not reached the valley when Gerald woke.

Cold air clung to the thatch above him. The floor held the night's dampness, and the leg answered his first step with a dull throb that pulsed along the shin and up into the hip. He set both palms against the wall, shifted weight, tested movement. Flexion at the knee held at forty-two degrees. Extension short by eight. Acceptable. The axolotl rhythm continued to take everything it could.

He stepped outside.

The sky was a washed-out grey, the kind that sat between night and morning without choosing either. Smoke from the cookfires had not begun. Only the cows stirred, restless and irritated, their low moans drifting across the field.

The communal pen sat behind a line of crude wooden stakes. Gerald walked toward it, dragging the left leg just enough to mark the limp but not enough to slow his pace. The herder boy stood by the gate, holding a rope and looking helpless.

One of the cows lay on her side, legs stiff, belly taut like a drum.

Gerald stepped over the fence. He knelt beside the animal, bracing his right hand against the flank. The left knee hit dirt, and he clenched his jaw as the joint strained, but he did not change position. His palms slid along the swollen rumen, feeling for the pocket of trapped gas.

He found it.

He lifted his head. "Roll her. Left side down. Then walk her slow."

The boy obeyed without a question. They pushed the cow together, the beast groaning as air shifted inside her. Once she rolled, she gave a long, sour belch that filled the morning with a sickly smell. Another breath. A third. Then she staggered to her feet and shook her head.

The boy blinked at Gerald. He did not speak, but his eyes carried the message to the next bystander. That bystander carried it further. And by the time Elder Thorne reached the pen, three more villagers had formed a line behind him with animals in tow.

Gerald stood, dusted his hands on his trousers, and nodded toward the next one.

There was work to do.

The first animal was a goat. Its rear hoof was soft, blackened, and foul. The owner spoke but Gerald did not listen. He had no interest in apologies or explanations.

He pointed at the pot sitting by the trough. "Water. Boil it."
The man ran. Gerald gathered pine twigs and crushed them into a tar-like paste. Salt from the drying shed completed it. When the water reached a rolling boil, he dipped strips of cloth into it

and wrapped the hoof, pressing the blackened flesh free with practiced pressure. The goat cried once, more annoyed than in pain.

“Change the dressing each day. Use clean water.”
He said nothing more. The villager wanted to linger, but Gerald had already moved on.

Next came a milking cow. Hardness at one quarter of the udder. Heat. Pain under pressure. The woman shifted nervously when Gerald touched the swollen area, but she kept silent. He placed her hands where they needed to go, guided her through slow motions.

“Strip this part last. Do not mix it with the others. If it smells rotten, it is pus. Not milk.”

The woman nodded. He did not repeat himself.

A draft ox followed. Old. Joints swollen at the knees. Gerald walked to the shed, found a handful of willow bark, crushed it between two stones, and mixed it with turmeric root. The paste was bitter. He forced it past the ox’s teeth. The beast groaned, then swallowed.

He wiped his hands on his shirt. The paste clung to the skin, staining it yellow.

One animal replaced another. A pig with a punctured foot. A calf with mild fever. A sheep that refused to eat. Gerald’s fingers worked without hesitation. His explanations were short and cold. He did not argue. He did not soothe. He simply demonstrated once, then left each owner to measure the result.

The villagers did not thank him. They only added more animals to the line.

Kael stood by the fence, arms folded across his chest. He watched every motion. Every cure. Every decision. When the final villager pulled his goat away, Kael reached into his satchel and tossed Gerald a strip of dried meat.

“You fix beasts better than our healer fixes men.”

Gerald bit into the meat. It was coarse and salty. Good. Protein and dense calories. He chewed slowly, counting each bite, gauging how much fuel would burn before reaching the leg.

“I fixed men first,” he said. “Beasts are simpler.”

Kael grunted. That was the end of it.

They sat under the barn’s shallow eaves. Sunlight crept across the ground but had not reached them yet. Kael worked a whetstone along the length of his spear. Gerald ate in measured bites, swallowing each piece only after grinding it to near paste with his teeth.

Kael broke the silence.

“Cow breath is steady. Train it long enough and it returns the favor. Ten years of pasture. One ton. Twenty years if you are unlucky. Five tons if you are honest with your work.”
He shifted the spear. Sparks jumped where metal kissed stone.
“Most stop there. Ten tons is knight. Thirty is lord. We do not see higher in these parts.”

Gerald did not look up from the meat in his hand. “How much food for the first ton?”

Kael huffed. “Something like sixty kilograms of rice if you were to refine the whole body. More if you want to stay alive while doing it. Food is scarce. Even nobles fight for it. Even I.”
He tapped his own chest.
“Eight tons. Because my uncle shared his stores when he left for the king’s service. If not for my useless breathing technique, I would have broken ten. Maybe reached knight.”

Gerald’s gaze shifted to his left leg. The scars had closed, leaving pale lines like faint rivers across the calf. The limp remained, deep in the bone and nerves. “Regeneration takes everything. Axolotl rhythm is greedy. It burns every scrap of food to rebuild tissue. Nothing left for muscle. I will not reach one ton for months. A year if winter is hard.”

Kael angled the spear’s edge toward the light. He tested it with his thumb.
“You could have chosen dog breath. Even a cripple can fight with it. Explosive. Sharp. Better than nothing.”

“I chose to walk again.”

Kael’s jaw shifted. Whether in respect or pity, Gerald did not care to guess.

“Walking is cheap,” Kael said. “Running pays.”

Gerald took another piece of meat. Chewed. Swallowed. “I will pay when I can run.”

Kael said nothing more. He sharpened the spear until his hands were satisfied with its edge.

A child came running. She halted a few paces away, chest heaving.
“The chief wants you. At the racks.”

Gerald stood slowly. The left leg dragged. He ignored it. He followed her past the storage huts and the grain shed until they reached the clearing where meat hung on wooden frames.

The entire village had gathered.

A wolf carcass swayed from a beam. Fresh kill. The throat torn open, its fur stained with dried blood. Another body lay near the fence, the mate. Kael’s spear tip rested against its ribs.

Elder Thorne stood before the hanging wolf. He cut the chest open with a long, curved knife and reached inside. When he pulled his hand free, he held the heart.

He walked toward Gerald.

“For the one who kept our cows breathing.”

Gerald accepted the heart. It was still warm, heat pulsing beneath the surface. Blood dripped onto the dirt.

He raised it to his mouth and bit into it. The taste was metallic. Thick. Heavy with vitality. Villagers watched in silence as he devoured it, tearing strips loose with slow, careful motions. Blood ran down his chin. He did not wipe it.

The energy hit like molten metal poured through his ribs. It surged into the channels along his spine, flooding nerve-endings, forcing warmth into cold muscle. His left leg straightened. Just once. Almost fully.

The axolotl rhythm drank everything.

The leg sagged again. The pain returned.

No one spoke. The villagers understood well enough. Even monster meat was not enough when the entire body demanded tribute.

Gerald licked the last of the blood from his fingers and handed the cleaned bone back to the chief.

The chief nodded. No praise. No blessing. Only acknowledgment that the transaction was complete.

The sun fell behind the hills, and cold crept across the fields. Gerald sat outside his hut with the knife he had earned for curing the ox. He drew it along a smooth stone, listening to the quiet rasp as metal sharpened.

Kael approached and sat without invitation. His boots were dusty from hunting. His hands rested on his knees.

“Next moon, the royal collectors come,” Kael said. “They take one calf for every ten born this year. We will be short.”

Gerald tested the knife’s edge against his thumb. Sharp. Sufficient.
“I can make the herd stronger. Fewer stillbirths. Better milk. Faster growth. But I need tools. I need medicines and better feed for them..”

Kael studied him for a long moment. His eyes did not soften. His posture did not change.

“You want investment.”

“I want time.”

Kael stood. “Earn it. We have had more nobles testing as if they were sages from the aurean depths. I can give it but the people will not. ”

He walked off without waiting for a reply.

Gerald watched him disappear into the dusk. He looked at the knife in his hand. Then at the leg that refused to obey him fully.

Blood from the wolf still stained his shirt.

He smiled, small and cold.

Time was just another organ to grow.

Chapter 5

Gerald woke with the quiet certainty of someone who had survived another demanding week. The hut's wooden roof still smelled of fresh oil, the kind Kael used to weatherproof his tools. He lay there for a moment, breathing steadily, letting his limbs speak before his mind did. The muscles felt compact and full. The bones no longer carried that fragile ache left from the first wolf attack weeks ago. His body had rebuilt itself carefully, layer by layer, devouring every scrap of meat he had earned.

He rose and pressed his palm against the doorframe. The frame resisted, but not for long. Four hundred kilograms lifted without strain. He lowered it again, not wanting to disturb the stillness of dawn.

The number was not impressive for someone with a consummation-level rhythm. It was merely the physical ceiling forced upon him by hunger. Consummation granted the talent of regeneration, but it also devoured energy greedily. Every cut healed overnight. Every bruise vanished by dawn. Every overexerted tendon knitted itself clean while he slept. That healing did not come free. The body demanded repayment in flesh.

Weeks of careful hunting had brought him here, yet four hundred kilograms felt like only a fraction of what should have been possible.

Outside, the village stirred. Smoke curled from the first cookfires. Hooves thudded against packed soil as the cowherds moved the herd toward pasture. Gerald stepped outside, carrying the three spears he had borrowed from the rack.

Someone called out to him.
"Morning, Gerald."

It was Lior, Kael's son, jogging past with a spear strapped behind his back. The boy was sharp-eyed and restless, his dog-breath rhythm flickering like a fast heartbeat. Gerald acknowledged him with a nod. Lior had taken to observing him these past weeks, not out of suspicion but from an adolescent hunger for growth.

"You look more solid today," Lior said as he slowed his pace. "Like you slept deeper."

Gerald looked down at the ground. A small impression had formed beneath his heel. "Maybe I did."

Lior smiled. It was the smile of someone who wanted to ask more but knew better than to pry. He tightened the strap on his spear and jogged off toward the training posts.

Gerald walked toward the forest edge where Kael usually prepared for the day's work. The hunter was already there, sorting through the dried spears and checking each shaft for warping. Kael looked up as Gerald approached. His gaze was level, neither searching nor intrusive. That was why Gerald preferred speaking to him. Kael did not ask for explanations he had no right to.

"You're standing cleaner this morning," Kael said while testing a spear's balance.

“I had a good night,” Gerald replied.

“Your leg finally stays straight,” Kael added. “That is new.”

Gerald did not answer immediately. He rolled his ankle slowly and felt the joint move without resistance. “It holds now. The healing finally caught up.”

Kael grunted softly. “Consummation does that. Each breath grants a breathing skill only when one reaches consummation. You are lucky that the one you got was off healing.”

Gerald met Kael’s eyes. “It healed faster when I ate more.”

“That is how it always works,” Kael said. “A breath like yours burns more food than you want to admit.”

Gerald did not deny it. His empty larder had spoken that truth well enough.

Kael handed him a spear. “Going in again today?”

“Just the shallows,” Gerald said. “Enough to buy tonight’s meal.”

Kael studied him for a brief moment. “You could push deeper if you wished.”

“I could,” Gerald said. “But I will not yet. I still owe the village more than it owes me. I will not die a debtor.”

Kael nodded once. He did not smile, but his voice softened. “You helped the herd this week. Three calves would have died without you.”

“That was simple treatment,” Gerald replied.

“It was simple for you,” Kael said. “Not for the rest of us.”

A silence settled between them, comfortable enough that neither rushed to fill it. Gerald adjusted the grip of his spear, testing the wood’s flex. Kael adjusted his own spear with practiced familiarity.

After a moment, Kael asked, “How far did you rise this week?”

Gerald considered the question. Kael did not mean it arrogantly. In Lowmere, strength was spoken in straightforward terms. There was no vanity in asking; only an assessment of someone’s capacity to survive.

“Four hundred,” Gerald said.

Kael lifted his brow slightly. “Slow.”

“The food was thin,” Gerald replied.

“That would do it.” Kael leaned his spear against the rack. “At consummation, you could have jumped far beyond that if you had eaten like a lord.”

“I did not,” Gerald said. “So I did not.”

Kael accepted the answer without comment. That was his nature. He understood that a man’s rhythm was his own business unless shared freely.

The hunter stepped closer and spoke in a quieter tone. “You will need more strength if you want to leave the shallows.”

“I know.”

“And more food.”

“I know that too.”

Kael exhaled. “If you want help, ask. Not for coin. For the sake of the herd. A stronger breather makes the village safer.”

Gerald looked toward the forest where soft light filtered between the branches. “When I can walk without hunger emptying me, I will ask.”

Kael placed a hand on his shoulder briefly. “Good. Then go. The forest waits.”

The day passed in a controlled rhythm.

Gerald hunted small animals in the shallows and returned each kill carefully. He sold some. He cooked others. A portion went back into training. Another portion went to animals he strengthened with his treatments. Every action tied to the next in the same quiet loop: hunt, eat, refine, survive.

By the end of the week, the four hundred kilograms became stable rather than strained. His body no longer felt hollow after meals. His breath sat comfortably in his lungs. The consummation talent no longer drained him into weakness.

The next morning, he stepped outside and tested his body again.
A single breath aligned perfectly.
A single lift told him the truth.
The strength did not tremble.
The healing was complete.

Kael observed from a distance and approached.

“You are steady today,” he said.

Gerald nodded. “The body finished what it needed to; though it took months.”

Kael’s eyes sharpened. “Then you are ready. When you decide to walk past the shallows, you won’t go alone. I will walk the first stretch with you.”

Gerald accepted the promise with a quiet nod. No gratitude spoken, but present in the way he met Kael's gaze without looking away.

Strength was a path.
He had taken the first steps.
Now the forest waited.

The next series of days blurred into a strict routine. Hunt smaller animals while ensuring to return faster so as not to be targeted by some predator. He ate daily hoping to reach tier one as it was named. It was the basic level beyond a mortal. One ton of strength and vitality activated as energy to control the body. Talents would now be more active. If he wanted he could have spent time to just make his body reach that limit. But then, the disability would be permanent, even if the higher healing would have been acquired.

Gerald smiled as he thought of the village. The village adapted around him. Children whispered that the stranger jumped like a bird. Adults brought him sick animals to cure. Lior watched him with hungry ambition as he hoped to master a breath just like Gerald.

Gerald watched his own body with sharper eyes.

The strength inside him grew steadily. Every piece of meat became energy, every energy turned into refinement, every refinement pushed his strength toward a threshold.

Half a ton.

Seven hundred kilograms.

Nine hundred.

One morning, he rose from sleep and felt the change unmistakably — the deep resonance beneath his ribs had thickened, tightened into something full.

One ton. He felt the energy. He made a small cut and found it heal soon. He knew that his bones would be healed and no injury would last a night. It seemed the reason to why those below 1 ton strength was called mortal was due to this though only one or two in an era might reach consummation of breath. He wanted to tell his friends of the news. He returned happily as he knew he could hunt deeper and no injury would ever hold onto him.

Walking back to the hut, he caught Kael watching from a distance.

"You broke through," Kael said.

Gerald nodded. "Finally."

Kael exhaled slowly. "Your body looks different. Breath sits clean in you."

Gerald straightened. “My healing is complete. Any injury now will fade in a day or a night.”

Kael’s gaze flicked to Gerald’s legs. “Your limp is gone.”

Gerald tested a lunge, fast and controlled. No pain. No drag.

A quiet smile touched his lips — the kind rarely seen, almost invisible. “Yes. Gone.”

Kael grunted approval. “Good. You earned it. Not many do.”

For a moment, the two stood in silence — a hunter and a stranger, both bound by work, strength, and the rough dignity of survival.

Then Kael spoke again. “From today on, you are not just some boy we pulled from the woods. You are a one-ton breather. You belong here properly.”

Gerald looked toward the forest where shadows waited between the trees. Strength was no longer a hope. It was a path.

And he would walk it until he reached the farthest edge of what this world allowed.

Chapter 6

Gerald stepped from the hut into late morning air that tasted of grass and smoke. The village lay small around him, a scatter of thatch and stout fences, and the horizon held nothing taller than the low ridge where the hunter kept his spears. He tested the old leg as he moved, not because he did not believe in his powers of healing, but because he preferred to measure the body by action rather than some illusionary feeling of the body.. The leg was fine as he found putting pressure on his body parts, one at a time.

Kael led without hurry. The hunter walked like one who expected to meet trouble and preferred to make its acquaintance on his own terms. He did not speak until they reached the house at the village edge, a larger square of timber where the Barrowfield name had been carved into the lintel and then softened by sun and wind. Roth stood in the doorway, tall enough to make the roof seem smaller, hands crossed at the wrist as if holding himself together by discipline. His gaze found Gerald's chest and stayed there, counting the rhythm as a man might count the beat of a drum. When he spoke, his voice laid down the shape of a sentence like grain placed in a sack: "You have reached consummation." character design

Gerald felt no rush of victory. He felt only the quiet of a thing recognized by someone who had seen many things before. The word consummation in this valley meant a change in the body's grammar. It did not mean invulnerability. It meant that a door had opened, that rhythms once foreign might be learned without the body tearing itself apart. Gerald sat as Roth invited and let Kael pour the wine. The hunter did not offer him a cup with the kind of charity that asked for thanks. He offered it as an instrument, and Gerald accepted it in the same way a surgeon accepts a scalpel.

The wine was surprising: thick and warm and held a taste of smoke beneath ripe fruit. Gerald had brewed it himself with the method he kept for private things. He did not tell Roth that. He said instead what the village register suggested would be plausible. "My family made this for winter trade. They wished to marry me into convenience. I left because I could not bend to their plan." The lie was smooth and exact. Roth did not ask for proof. He tasted the second cup and held the

memory of that flavor between two silent thoughts. He said then, plain as grain, “This could sell in Greenhollow and buy you months of meat.” village

Roth set his cup down as if that single motion were enough to finish an argument. He had a way of sitting at the edge of a thing and making the world arrange itself around his judgment. Kael, who had gone into the forest and come out with spears and a story of teeth and bone, watched from the threshold and said, “My efficiency is one point two.” He did not make it boastful. It sounded like a factual measure of how a man’s breath returned the work of food to the body. Roth nodded, as if the number mattered and as if it mattered little. He looked at Gerald again and pronounced, “You sit at one.”

Gerald registered the numbers as a scientist registers variables. One point two and one. They were not only arithmetic. They were the slope by which a man rose or remained nailed to his rank. Efficiency multiplied the work of food when refining the body; it halved, tripled, or left untouched the hours needed to turn the same meat into weight, into tendon, into bone. The hunter’s pride and the hunter’s modesty could both be read in the numbers. Roth’s own breathing, the heavy, steady current that sat in the man like a working bellows, belonged to the Cow’s Breath and carried efficiency of something higher. Otherwise one cannot simply rise above their station for being talented only.. It explained why many such men found the labor of raising a body lighter than other men could imagine. Roth’s tone held a fact he had seen enough to trust: healing techniques offered balance at the cost of speed. Gerald’s breath, gentle and deep as water pulled from a well, had chosen a healing pattern; that choice explained the one figure by which Roth measured him.

No one in the room offered him pity. Pity in Lowmere felt like a disease; it left the receiver smaller and the giver heavier. Roth’s expression did not thin into sympathy. He leaned forward only enough to make the shadow beneath his brow deeper and said, “A consummate man who started on healing will not be stopped from becoming a knight even if his physical talent is poor. Consummation is the lock. Skill is the key. You have the lock.” The sentence carried the kind of certainty that required no argument. It also carried an unspoken cost: time and food and the care of those who could see beyond the registers.

Gerald drank the wine and let the warmth follow his breath into the hollow of his chest. He had believed, in the slow nights when bone and nerve had been the center of his attention, that consummation was a closed path. He had thought that the particular lizard he had chosen as a model for healing would bind him. The hunter who had saved him had taught him to survive. The village healer had stitched him and given him a promise. None of those ministrations had told him that the human form could be taught new rhythms after the body reached that final stage. Roth, with his cow’s breadth of patience, said the truth gently. “Once you reach consummation, the body will accept other rhythms. It does not mean you forget the first. It means you can learn. You will choose what you need to refine with speed. Your body returns to

your innate breath with the other breaths as some kind of subordinate breath. At least that is what is written. I cannot fathom it." Gerald received this as a laboratory would receive new equipment, with the same calm assessment and the absence of longing or triumph.

Kael's fist found the spear at his side and tapped the ground in a slow rhythm, a hunter's punctuating gesture. "You could have picked a dog breath," he said. "You would have been faster. You could run now. Instead you chose to bind your body to healing so you might be whole again." He said it without accusation. The old choice had been Gerald's alone; the consequences belonged to him as well. Gerald heard the words as an experiment hears a variable. He had measured his body's priorities and chosen the one he calculated would preserve the greatest number of future options. "I chose to walk again," he said, not shouting but asserting. He felt then the quiet approval that sometimes followed a practical decision.

Roth returned to the question of money and of food with the exact disinterest of a landlord examining a field. "You should join the academy. We will not starve you. The Academy will sponsor food if you are found worthy, but first you must be seen in Greenhollow." He paused over the syllables as if they were stones to be placed carefully. "You are on the village register now. That is your shield. I will not unmake what you claimed. Come to the Academy in the spring. We will find a tutor for refinement. Until then you will stay here, and if your wine can be sold, we will sell it." The sentence asked nothing but obedience. Gerald agreed with a single nod.

The conversation turned then to what the Academy did and did not teach. Roth did not lecture; he compared. He spoke of the way a man's patience could be transformed into precision and how the kingdom judged a person not by the origin of his breath but by the point to which he could refine the body under that breath. He explained that knights were proof of human steadiness, that lords were proof of a humanity made into an instrument. "A knight with consummation will always find a path to a title. The body that has burned its rhythm into flesh does not lie. Unlike those who are bound by talent of the body, even the last talented can naturally forge to the level of a Lowmere noble. Roth said. Gerald thought of the ledger of meals he had counted, of the strips of meat weighed in his palm to judge how much had gone to the healing that had made the bone knit. He did not speak of his calculations. Now he no longer needed to heal. All food was for survival and forging his body.

When Roth rose, it was as if the room bent back to its proper form. He placed a large hand on Gerald's shoulder in a manner that belonged neither to friend nor to master, but to someone who had decided on behalf of a village. "Do not mistake this for charity," he said. "We take risks on those who might repay the village by not dying early. We do not want another Falcon massacre. But if you can really break from your family, I hope you support me and this village. Though this nation is the most noble and moral of all, it is still run by the powerful." That was the closest thing to warmth in his voice, and it had the honesty of barter. Gerald felt the heat of it, not

because the words touched something gentle, but because he had always preferred his obligations in ledger form. A promise to be of use was a sum he could count.

They ate again. Kael laid out a chunk of wolf meat, roasted in simple salt and smoke, and the chief gave Gerald the heart without ceremony as if presenting a tool. Gerald ate with the same deliberation he used to test a sample in a lab. The vital flood the meat gave moved through him and did what he had expected it to do. The energy flooded his body as he felt the vital energy stored inside as something ethereal and controllable. He knew this could be used as an aid in fight. This was why most humans were superior to normal monsters.

Kael left after dusk and Roth remained to speak with Gerald alone. The hunter's son had been taught to respect silence; Gerald had been taught to observe it. Roth told him then, in a voice that bore only the weight of facts, that the Academy took not only nobles but common men who showed proof of refinement. The sponsorship Roth offered was not a miracle. It was transportation, food, and a place among those who would test him. Gerald understood the deal without needing to weigh it again. He had no illusions about ceremonies or immediate elevation. He had only a recognition of method. The path from healing insect to a second breath would be slow and exact, and he would have to pay for each lesson with the only currency that mattered in this world: time and meat.

Before he left, Roth put his reinforced spear into Gerald's hand. The shaft was smooth and worn at the place where a man's palm would rest. "Practice," Roth said. "Learn to throw. Learn to carry your weight. You will need to prove you are not a village ghost." The spear felt like an answer in wood. Gerald held it and felt the easy balance of a tool well-made. He did not smile. He steadied his breath and tested the weight of the promise.

When Gerald walked back along the fence-line under a sky grown cold with the coming night, he thought in the only language that ever steadied him: measures. Food would buy growth; efficiency would buy time; the Academy would buy the market of meals. His wine might buy the first stretch of winter. He had been offered a seat, a spear, and a map. He had been given no miracles.

He set the remaining bottle on the shelf in his hut and closed the door. Outside, the village bell chimed the hour and the cattle lowed as if to mark each sting of the sound against the night. Gerald sat with his hands folded, feeling the residue of the day move through his muscles as a slow tide. He said aloud to the empty room, not because an answer would come, but because speaking arranged his thoughts in the order he preferred. "I will need much more food."

The sentence fell into the quiet and was not an admission of fear. It was a calculation, a ledger, and a plan. He had been given a path that required endurance. He would set the numbers against one another and let them decide which breath to learn next. Outside his window a dog barked once, and somewhere beyond the ridge a far-off tree creaked as wind moved across its limbs. Gerald felt the rhythm of his own breath and matched it to the hush of the world. He would learn, he would buy, and when spring came he would go to the Academy. He had to find a new breathing technique among the beings he had observed in his previous life, to find those who digested the food the fastest. But for now there was work to do and meat to save and a new technique waiting like a closed instrument that would open with the right hand.

Chapter 7

Gerald sat on the flat stone at the forest's edge and listened to the slow rhythm of his own breath. The pulse of the woods drifted with the wind, and the morning light turned the leaves into floating sheets of gold. He had spent the early hours observing the animals near the water basin and comparing their breathing patterns with the memory of the beasts he had met in the past week. When he finally made his choice, there was no hesitation.

The alligator's breath was heavy, slow, and relentless. Among the creatures he had personally observed, it was the only one whose digestion impressed him. Vulture breath had tempted him because of its famed endurance, but he had never seen a vulture with his own eyes. The breathing law demanded real observation, not imagination, and he refused to anchor his future to a rhythm he had never watched or studied.

He closed his eyes and aligned his lungs to the slow compression and release he remembered from the reptile dozing half-submerged near the muddy bank. The rhythm pressed into his bones like weighted water. He felt its shape settle into him.

At consummation, the body returned to its innate breath, yet the learned rhythm did not vanish. It attached itself as a secondary pulse. The old master in the chief's stories had called it an inner current that would remain with the practitioner for life unless replaced. Gerald understood enough physiology to know that adapting too many pulses could scar the body. One had to move slowly. One had to let each layer settle.

He stood and stretched his arms overhead. The breath settled deeper and the world sharpened. When he drew air through his teeth, he sensed that the food he had eaten that morning would break down faster. His stomach felt warmer. His spine felt steadier.

He spent the morning fighting through the underbrush with a long wooden spear, clearing shallow nests, driving away boars, and collecting whatever he could kill. He had no wish to waste energy, so he engaged only small wolves and lean deer that strayed too far from their pack or herd. When a gray-furred juvenile wolf lunged at him, he pivoted, thrust the spear through its ribs, and steadied his breathing the entire time. The fight lasted only seconds. Blood sank into the dirt, and he withdrew the spear with a slow twist. There was no thrill on his face. Only the satisfaction of getting a new clean technique.

As he dragged the carcass toward the village boundary, the alligator rhythm worked inside him. His strength crept upward in slow increments. He knew the theory. Four hundred and eighty kilograms of rice was the conventional amount of energy needed for the four-ton jump from one ton to five tons. But those values meant little in the forest. He could not count every calorie while fighting. Injuries demanded energy. Healing pulled from reserves without warning. Only when he had spent several days on this new rhythm did he begin to notice a pattern. He needed less food. The food needed to increase in kg of strength as he had kept track now increased his strength by 5 kg of strength. This had meant that his efficiency was five. He had known he reached consummation of the breath would further increase efficiency, and now the numbers proved it.

But more than that was the profound understanding that he would never have to worry about any upper limits. Even if a person had unlimited food, he could not grow indefinitely. The body had a limit. The breathing technique does increase this limit and as Roth had said, even the weakest physique can reach the level of a Lowmere lord when had a reached consummation in any breathing technique. But he could learn more and more breaths as long as he let it settle down before he chose another. He should be having no upper limit or his upper limit should be the top of this world. He smiled knowing that he could reach the top and become the strongest.

He let the discovery settle quietly inside him. He did not celebrate. He did not grin. He only breathed deeper and accepted the new pace of his growth. Maybe, he could find a way to return to his home. Though there was none whom he loved alive, except his granddaughter, he preferred his home. What was there to keep a man away from his home other than the duty? Now he had no duty. As for this world, he had seen much more cruelty in the modern world. He was a top player in the game called life. Why should he live in this backward world.

He returned to the village with the wolf slung over his shoulder. The midday sun softened the roofs of the wooden homes, and the smell of cooked grain drifted in the air. Kael stood waiting beside the fence, a heavy sack of firewood balanced across his back. The man’s gaze moved from the carcass to Gerald’s steady posture, and his jaw tightened for a moment.

“You are back early. You seem much more happy than your usual self. It seems your gloom had vanished to the belly of a wolf..”

Gerald lowered the carcass onto the dirt and wiped his palm on a piece of square cloth he had kept as a habit. “The rhythm helped me. I found that I could lift 4 tons. It will not be much longer before I can reach 5 tons of strength.”

Kael nodded but looked away toward the villagers tending to their chores. His shoulders eased slightly. “You reached four tons sooner than I expected. I am only at three. Good work. But unless one reaches a knight level strength, we are not valued. After all, it is only at knight level that our bloodlines are strengthened and our children are born perfect.”

The tone was calm. The envy stayed behind Kael’s eyes, faint but present but behind it was a profane sadness or knowing the existence of the path but not being able to climb it. Gerald noticed it the same way he noticed weather changes. He said nothing for a moment, giving Kael space to speak first.

Kael leaned his spear against the fence and crossed his arms. “When you leave for the academy, remember the village. I do not ask for your money or your food. You know how nobles behave. Someday someone will draft villagers for war. Someone will arrive demanding payment or supplies. At that time… just make sure you stand with us. If you become strong enough to lead the conscripts, take them under you instead of letting them die under strangers.”

Gerald turned the spear in his hand and watched the dust drift from its point. “I will always be here for you. As for the village…” He paused and looked toward the small wooden homes, the few cows grazing near the pens, the children running between the troughs. “I will do what I can.”

Kael accepted this with a small nod. The man had lived long enough to know promises were heavy things. He tightened the straps of the firewood across his back. “That is enough.”

He walked away toward his home, leaving Gerald alone at the edge of the path.

Gerald sat on the ground, leaning the spear across his knees. He watched Kael disappear behind the chief’s long hut. The quiet of the afternoon settled around him. He tapped his thumb against the wood and let the breeze brush past his ear.

He wondered if he was still the same man who had lived a quiet, calculating life in another world. He had always measured relationships by utility. Resources. Efficiency. The instinct had not changed here. Even now, he weighed his choices by cost and advantage.

The thought pressed against him like a cold hand. The sky stretched wide and pale above the rooftops. He lifted his chin and stared at it for a long time.

He whispered nothing. He scolded nothing. He only sat there with a slow breath trapped in his lungs, the kind that made a man admit he knew his own flaws but lacked the gentleness to change them.

He exhaled gradually, letting the tightness in his chest loosen.

Tomorrow he would begin preparations. The academy waited. He had delayed as long as he could. The forest had given him the efficiency he needed, and the village had given him a place to heal. Now the path forward demanded that he leave.

He looked at his muddy dress stained with blood. He hated what he had become. He hated how he had to beg for help. He hated how he had to keep his real feelings hidden. He had not joined science purely for the sake of research. Yes, that was his interest. But what he wanted was to rise to the top as a researcher and a person from commoner background, he knew business was not a good choice. Now he no longer was happy living in a village. Though he never showed it and knew they never felt it, he really looked down on them. He had handled it with the precision of a seasoned veteran in top rich circles. He had talked to his patients as if they were his everything while he hated some of them. he wanted peace and the academy might provide that.

But for his personally dignity to be satisfied, he shall indeed take care of this village. He is indeed one of those who had stepped on the bones of people to rise high once. But those were not the bones of those who had done him favor. It shall never be so.

When the breeze cooled and the shadows grew longer, he finally stood. His eyes held no resentment. Only a steady resolve.

Tomorrow he would depart.

Chapter 8

The journey ended at noon, when the dust road widened into a plateau of trampled earth and the royal city rose before Gerald like a wall dropped from the heavens, its grey stone ramparts stretching forty feet high and running along the horizon in a long severe line, the battlements fitted with the quiet posture of a kingdom accustomed to training knights rather than fighting wars.

Inside those walls, he had expected some shift of atmosphere, perhaps something grand or ornamented, but the moment the wooden gates opened and the caravan moved into the streets, Gerald realized that Greenhollow, for all its reputation as a royal city, lived much like any other settlement had markets pushing against each other, smoke rising from communal forges, cattle being driven across narrow side-alleys, and commoners calling out prices with voices shaped by long habit rather than pride. He had hoped to something more modern or archaic but a managed settlement when he saw the walls.

Yet even so, the rhythm of the city carried a weight he had never felt before. Men and women walked with bodies already hardened by breathing. Many who lounged beside the street-side well carried easily more than a ton of physical strength; others, judging by the thickness of their joints and the quiet density beneath their steps, had crossed the five-ton threshold that tilted a person away from common mortality and into the beginnings of Lowmere's nobility system. The sight stole a silent breath from Gerald. He had only just brushed the edge of five tons, straining for that last increment with every hour of practice, dreaming that such a threshold might impress whoever funded the academy — perhaps enough to push him slightly upward in the social ladder he pretended not to covet. But here, strength seemed simply a currency of existence.

Roth Barrowfield walked beside him, untroubled by the noise of the streets, the hunter's steady pace moving like a boulder rolling at its own chosen speed. The ox-strong man carried no anxiety about comparisons; his eight-ton physique did not permit such thoughts. Gerald watched him from the corner of his eye and asked, "Is it always like this? So many with strength beyond one ton?"

Roth grunted in response, a low thoughtful sound that matched the deliberate cadence described in his profile character design. "This is a royal city. Even the fishmongers train. And every family hopes one child will reach the knight level. Expect at least one in every hundred to cross five tons if they survive their teens."

Gerald swallowed a dry breath. "That many strong ones?"

“That many corpses,” Roth corrected quietly. “The academy trains them. The academy also kills them. What else should one expect from pressure training.”

Gerald did not mistake the weight in his tone. When they stopped at a crossroad, and the crowd moved around them like water around a stone pillar, Roth leaned slightly closer, speaking with the calm certainty of someone who did not intend to repeat himself. “Do not try to befriend nobles yet. They see themselves above commoners. Even those who practice cow or goat breath. You want their attention, then become a knight first. At least reach ten tons — only then do they meet your eyes.”

His gaze shifted toward the distant silhouette of a broad stone complex resting against the inner wall, its banners fluttering in deep green and gold. “And do not join the student council hunting team,” he added. “That group bleeds students. They go into the deeper forest for stimulation. Danger makes their bodies grow faster. But that path kills more than it saves. You already refine at a speed most do not understand. You need no such madness.”

Gerald exhaled slowly. The warning was not advice but a boundary drawn from care — heavy, unspoken, and final.

They continued through the streets until the crowd thinned enough to reveal a gathering of knights and instructors standing behind a series of tables. At the center of them, dressed in layered desert robes, stood a tall man whose presence felt like a dune that had learned to breathe.

A voice called out with patient clarity, “Next.”

Gerald looked up and saw Sahir Al-Kharrim.

The desert teacher’s amber eyes held the stillness of someone accustomed to silence so deep it could split the mind. The short sun-bronzed hair, the posture that rested evenly upon both feet, and the subtle compression of lifeforce within his frame all matched the codex accounts of the Camel’s Breath master, a High Lord of forty tons who preferred humility to display character design.

Roth straightened with instinctive respect. “Teacher Sahir.”

Sahir’s gaze flicked briefly to him, then to Gerald, assessing with the same unhurried manner he applied to the dunes of Zah’Kar. Behind him, Gerald noticed assistants testing applicants — measuring physical density, assessing affinity to vital energy, asking candidates to breathe in specific rhythms while observing the resonance in their chests.

Roth leaned in and murmured, “Even though only lords or those past thirty tons can release energy outside the body, some people with strong affinity can perform it early. Just like how you could at one ton strength heal your own wounds which was only possible for those with 10 tons of strength and beyond.”

He spoke quietly, almost embarrassed to praise another man, but he continued, “Do not frown. When you reach ten tons, your healing will be as strong as those with thirty or fifty. Talent is only a magnifier. Strength is still the foundation.”

Gerald nodded faintly, though the words stirred a strange unease. Sahir, noticing their murmuring, dismissed Roth with a courteous gesture. “Let me speak with the boy alone. Your name is already recorded, Hunter Barrowfield. Your recommendation carries weight.”

Roth hesitated, then stepped back, though his eyes lingered on Gerald as if leaving him alone with a desert lord felt unnatural.

Sahir turned fully to Gerald. “Your breath… it is clean. Pure in its rhythm. Strange, but controlled.” His voice was low, almost meditative. “Where is your home?”

Gerald had prepared his lie long before reaching the gates. “A small farmland near the outer plains,” he said. “My family wished to marry me into a nearby house. I left.”

Sahir absorbed the words with no judgment, only the detached patience of someone who had walked from his own homeland for reasons he rarely spoke aloud. “Many boys run from marriages. It is to be expected as unlike the my lands, this nation seems to treat both men and women equally in terms of inheritance. But not all can reach refinement levels clean enough to enter an academy. This academy shall protect you from your family and marriages.” He smiled

at Gerald. His eyes glinted as he saw something curious, “You do not move like someone raised in Lowmere. And you do not think like a commoner.”

He said it not as suspicion, but as quiet acknowledgment.

Then, with the gentleness of a man accustomed to guiding the lost through storms, he added, “I also left my home. The Aurean Sands give leadership only to the Scorpion Breathers. I practice Camel’s Breath. Endurance, not venom. Stability, not killing.”

The air around him shifted slightly, as if warmed by memory. “The king here met me by chance. He offered me a place where patience is not mocked.”

Sahir spoke quietly as they walked, his eyes drifting toward the sky as though searching for dunes hidden behind the clouds.

“In the Aurean Sands,” he said, “the land teaches endurance before it teaches strength. Zah’Kar sits between dunes so wide you cannot see their end.”

Gerald tilted his head. “I’ve only heard fragments. Stories.”

“Stories fail,” Sahir replied, a faint smile touching his lips. “The scorpion soldiers earn their titles by surviving venom and heat. Their merit is harsh, but fair. They bow to no one who cannot outlast them.”

Gerald blinked, surprised by the certainty in his voice. “And camel breath… it really shapes your caravans?”

“It shapes our lives,” Sahir answered. “We travel from oasis to oasis, never for conquest. Only to keep rhythm steady. A caravan that breathes in harmony will cross a thousand dunes without losing a stride.”

Gerald found himself listening more than speaking, the images forming with vivid sharpness. “It sounds different from Lowmere. Different from anything I imagined.”

Sahir nodded gently. “It is a world that prizes patience over glory. You would understand it, I think.”

Gerald: “Teacher… how does the king rule in your homeland?”

Sahir: “A king does not rule in Zah’Kar. There is only the Sultan, and even he does not rule in the way Lowmere understands it.”

Gerald: “Then what does he do?”

Sahir: “He breathes for the people. That is the authority of Zah’Kar. The Sultan practices a perfected form of Scorpion’s Breath, but its essence is not venom. It is sacrifice. Every moon he gathers the tribes, and they offer their breath to him. He takes their rhythm into his own body, stores it, refines it, and returns it as strength when famine strikes or when caravans are dying under the sun. His life is not his. Every beat of his heart belongs to the desert.”

Gerald: “So he carries their strength?”

Sahir: “And their hunger. And their thirst. The dunes do not spare anyone. A ruler who cannot endure what his people endure is unworthy of breath in Zah’Kar.”

Gerald paused, imagining the dunes swallowing lives day after day, the caravans pushing through heat that could boil blood, families who lived only because their ruler gave them his own lifeforce.

Gerald: “That is… unique. And frightening. Wonderful, in a harsh way.”

Sahir’s eyes softened, though the lines of fatigue were visible beneath them. “You understand more than most. Zah’Kar is beautiful only to those who have bled for it. The desert does not reward kindness. It rewards endurance. And the Sultan endures more than any of us.”

The world widened before him with every sentence. It was much more than he thought and more mystical than he had imagined.

When the conversation ended, Sahir walked him toward the final table where students were being assigned lodgings. “You will be given a dormitory. And a rulebook. You have been granted a Lord-tier scholarship — that means you owe no labor and no payment until you reach the knight level. Use your time wisely.”

He paused, studying Gerald’s posture, which still reflected the restraint of someone accustomed to hiding ability. “You have reached consummation in not one but two breathing techniques,” he said quietly. “With no teacher. That alone is enough for me to call you a future high lord.”

The words struck Gerald harder than the city walls had. Sahir did not speak like a man flattering a student. He spoke as one recognizing a desert bloom forcing itself to life through dry soil.

An assistant walked over to take Roth’s suggested candidates, but Sahir raised a hand and dismissed the task. “I will interview them later. For now, I choose to observe this boy myself.”

A few gasps rose from students nearby.

When everything was complete, Sahir guided Gerald toward a set of stone dormitories built into the inner wall, each room simple but sturdy, meant for young bodies trained to break and rebuild themselves year after year. He placed a thin rulebook on the table and stepped back. “Rest. Read. Do not waste breath.”

Then he left Gerald alone, the echo of his footsteps fading into the stone corridor.

Gerald closed the door behind him and let the silence settle. The room was bare — stone floor, straw bed, small desk — but it felt heavier than any he had ever stood in.

He looked at the scholarship notice lying on the table.

Lord-tier.

All food covered.

All costs waived.

No labor required.

No debt to repay.

For someone one step away from five tons, from the threshold of knighthood, the meaning was clear.

The academy had already chosen him as a future asset.

He sat slowly on the bed, the faintest smile crossing his face before fading into something harder, quieter, determined.

The city outside roared with strength.

Inside this tiny room, he felt the world had just widened enough to swallow him whole.

And he intended to grow large enough to swallow it back.

Chapter 9

CHAPTER NINE – The Weight of Names

The morning light filtered through the high windows of the academy library, settling over the rows of leather spines and dust motes that drifted like pale insects. Gerald sat alone at the far table, his posture steady and composed, turning through pages that described the vital flow patterns of various beasts. His breath continued to circulate with calm, anchored rhythm, spine straight, legs planted, hands firm. Seven tons of strength sat quietly in his body. Two weeks of work had carved it into place without leaving a hint of strain on his frame.

He turned another page, absorbing every detail written about organs that burned energy faster than common men could eat. He enjoyed the quiet here. No patrols, no debt collectors, no sick animals brought to him by villagers desperate to save their livestock. His growth was steady. His breath sank deep. His strength rose without interruption. For a moment the world felt predictable.

A shadow moved across the page.

Someone blocked the light.

Gerald raised his eyes and saw a young man dressed in violet silk trimmed with silver thread. The fabric belonged to a noble family. The expression belonged to someone who believed walls bowed to him. His retainer stood behind him, cold and stiff, as if carved from wood.

“Barry of the Roxton House,” the retainer announced. “First son of the deputy lord of the eastern lands.”

Gerald closed the book. The young noble smiled as if greeting a dog that had not knelt quickly enough.

“You must be the scholarship student who caused a little noise in the physical yard,” Barry said. “Seven tons, they said. A respectable number for a stray. As long as you promise to join me, I shall name you my retainer.”

Gerald did not answer. He did not bow. He did not avert his gaze. He simply stared back, the

Gerald watched him without moving. The silence pressed on the air. Barry mistook it for hesitation.

“Sorry,” Barry said, lifting his chin as if extending mercy. “I understand commoners dream foolish dreams. But dreams end. Reality begins. If you stand behind me, your future will be comfortable. I can give you food, resources, and instruction. You only need to kneel when asked and strike when ordered. That is not much to pay.”

Gerald closed the book with slow care and placed it aside. “If comfort were my goal, I would have chosen it long ago.”

Barry let out a short breath of amusement. “Do not mistake stubbornness for dignity. Every man must decide what he wants: strength or survival. A lone tree breaks in the storm. A forest bends and endures. Stand with me, and you will endure. Stand alone, and you will break.”

Gerald stepped closer until Barry’s breath faltered. “A tree that bends forever never reaches the sky.”

Barry’s eyes narrowed. “So you would rather die reaching upward than live with those who can lift you?”

“I would rather stand alone and die on my feet,” Gerald said, “than live as a man who kneels for comfort. If I rise, it must be by my own breath and my own merit. If I join an army, it will be under a banner I choose because the work demands it, not because someone demands my loyalty for convenience.”

“You speak boldly for someone who has only seven tons of strength,” Barry said, though his voice lacked the confidence it had carried moments before. “Ambition without foundation is arrogance.”

Gerald held his gaze, steady as iron warmed in the forge. “Every foundation begins in a place that others do not see. You build yours on other men’s backs. I build mine on the ground beneath my feet. I do not look for someone to stand in front of me.”

Barry’s jaw tightened. “You truly refuse the offer?”

Gerald answered, “I refuse anything that chains the path I must walk. If I join, it will be as a soldier who earns his place in war. Not as a retainer who shines another man’s name.”

Barry stepped forward until their shoulders nearly touched. His breath shook with pride sharpened into irritation. “You will regret this. The world is too large for men who walk alone.”

Gerald turned, leaving the conversation behind him. “Then I will grow large enough that the world cannot look down on me.”

Barry said nothing as Gerald walked away. He stood still, fists clenched, eyes burning with a mixture of wounded pride and disbelief. Around him, the other students pretended not to stare, but their silence carved the verdict clearly onto the noble’s face.

Gerald did not look back. The corridor felt vast and cold, but the path in front of him felt clearer than ever. He would climb without stains. He would rise without kneeling.

If the summit killed him, then he would die still facing upward.

That was enough.

“Let me teach you how to respect strength. You may kneel now,” Barry said. “I do not like waiting.”

His guards stepped forward. Their hands pressed Gerald’s shoulders. The command was curt and practiced, but the breath behind it was nothing compared to the disciplined rhythm in Gerald’s

body. He remained seated. The guards grunted. Their muscles shook as if they were trying to force down a tree trunk that refused to bend.

Gerald rose. The guards stepped back with instinctive alarm.

He looked down at Barry. “Is that what you do when you find that you cannot recruit somebody.”

Barry’s face lost its composure. “You will kneel.”

Gerald stepped forward. The floor groaned beneath the release of controlled strength. Seven tons of force flowed through his muscles with unbroken precision. He stopped an arm’s length from Barry.

“I do not kneel,” Gerald said.

He hit the two guards who dared to touch him, sending them to the side. Seeing Barry approach him, he ducked the blow, knowing he was better at fist fight than this noble scion.

Barry swung. His fist carried two tons maybe three, enough to break ribs in a normal boy. Gerald caught the punch in his palm. He could feel the strain of Barry’s bones. A single twist sent the noble sprawling onto his knee. The sound echoed. Books trembled. Barry’s guards froze in shock.

Gerald did not strike again. He simply pushed Barry’s head aside like one pushes a stubborn calf off the road. Barry fell on both knees this time, breath ragged, face flushed with humiliation.

Not a word was spoken.

Gerald walked past him and left the library.

Students parted like grass before a steady wind.

The tension did not follow him out. It waited.

It found him soon.

Maria stood in the corridor outside the library doors. She wore the academy’s white uniform, but the faint ornamentation around her collar marked her as a noble from a secondary branch line. Her long black hair was tied neatly, her eyes calm and steady. She had been waiting for him.

“Gerald,” she said. “I saw what happened.”

He gave a slight nod.

She stepped closer until her voice could not be overheard. “You should know the Roxton family will not overlook this. Barry may be weak, but his family is not. They will find a way to make you pay for refusing to kneel.”

Gerald listened without speaking. Her tone held no fear, no trembling admiration, only clear warning. The kind given by someone who understood how nobles twisted the world to suit their pride.

“You defended yourself,” she continued softly. “I do not blame you. But they will. Please be careful.”

Something about her presence felt strangely grounding. Her breath was gentle and well controlled, not the panicked flutter common to students watching a fight from afar. She was not a fighter, but she knew danger when she saw it.

But he kept away from her. Many girls had indeed tried to approach him but he felt it not worth his time before he established himself. This girl was trouble as she was the daughter of a high ranking noble. He did not want trouble now.

Before she could speak further, a group of academy instructors appeared around the hallway corner. Their expressions were unreadable. The girl stepped aside and vanished into the crowd, leaving only the faint reminder of her warning.

The instructors approached Gerald with polite stiffness.

“The academy has reached a decision,” the first instructor said. “You are required to join the hunting squad for the next expedition. It is the responsibility of every capable youth to serve the kingdom.”

Gerald understood immediately. Barry had complained. Barry’s family had agreed. The academy had chosen a convenient punishment disguised as duty.

He gave a short nod. “Understood.”

The instructor’s eyes flickered in relief. They had expected argument.

As the group dispersed, Sahir emerged from behind a stone pillar. He looked as if he had been listening. His expression was calm as always, eyes still as desert sand.

“You are angry,” Sahir said.

Gerald’s breath tightened in his chest. Only for a moment.

Sahir placed a hand on his shoulder with quiet certainty. “There is a way to balance this. I spoke with the supply master. I will obtain higher vitality crystals from the royal storehouse. They will allow you to break through from seven tons to twelve. Enough to stand on your own for the next stage.”

Gerald exhaled slowly. Sahir’s presence had always steadied him. The offer was not kindness. It was investment.

“There is a condition,” Sahir added. “You must survive the hunt. The crystals will not arrive in time. You will go in with your current strength.”

Gerald nodded. “I can manage.”

Sahir held his gaze for a long moment before turning away. “Then prepare.”

He returned to his dormitory as dusk gathered over the academy walls. The room was cold and empty. The hunt would come soon. Seven tons were enough for a student, not enough for a forest beast that fed on monsters.

He needed more than strength. He needed defense.

Gerald knew the choice he had refused. He understood perfectly well that many climbed by kneeling first, that bending for a season could buy safety for a year. It was not stupidity that stopped him. It was the simple reality of what he intended to become.

He could obey the rules of the kingdom when needed. He could pay bribes if the law demanded it. He could tolerate noble sons when the situation required it. If he ever served under a lord as a hired knight, that would be acceptable, because service was not loyalty. It was payment. He could bend to regulations, to taxes, to royal decrees that kept order in the land. Those were structures of the world. They were not men.

But kneeling to another person simply because the man wished it was different. That was a mark left on the path upward, a stain that followed every step. A man who kneels for convenience kneels again when pressed. That rhythm sinks into the marrow. Gerald could not afford that.

He studied the arithmetic of his own future as calmly as he would study an anatomy chart. To rise from five tons to ten, he would need more than a ton of refined energy. After ten tons, the numbers became worse. Nine point six tons of ordinary rice just to push his body from ten to thirty. Even with perfect digestion, it was months of eating, months of converting, months of waiting. Food alone would not carry him to the point he desired.

He needed richer sources. Stronger meat. Vital crystals. Resources that only reached the hands of those who lived in better halls or carried better names. Reputation opened such doors. Not obedience. Not servitude. Reputation.

Most great knights began as commoners. Some clawed their way to thirty tons and gained the title of lord. But even they took years. They hunted. They bled. They risked death for every scrap of monster flesh. Hunting was possible for him too, but meat with enough energy to matter came from beasts far more dangerous than he could handle now.

A different path was necessary. A name that could not be ignored. An image strong enough that resources reached him because others wished to be associated with his rise.

He had not expected Barry to react with such bruise-hearted fury. A noble's temper was predictable, but the sudden insistence on forcing a response added another layer of complication. Gerald sighed quietly. He would have accepted many inconveniences, but not that one.

If a day came when a king demanded his knee, then he would deal with that moment when it arrived. He did not intend to kneel even then, yet thinking about it now would only slow his pace. There were no simple paths upward, and worrying about future chains before he reached the height where such chains mattered was a waste of breath.

For now, he only needed strength. Everything else was noise.

If true pressure came, he could always find some countryside lord who needed a hired blade more than a kneeling servant. Service without surrender. Duty without loyalty. That was tolerable. A temporary post under a distant banner would not touch the core of his rhythm.

But these were thoughts for another time. The only thing that mattered now was rising higher.

He needed more strength. He needed a new rhythm. Another breathing technique. Something that could carry him faster than rice and patience alone.

That was the only direction worth thinking about. Everything else could wait.

He sat on the floor and closed his eyes. Flying techniques tempted him. The ability to rise above danger, to escape claws and fangs and arrows, could save him a thousand times. But flight belonged to higher realms. Without at least ten tons of strength, even a consummate rhythm could not lift him from the ground.

He thought of the breaths he had seen in the records. The cow with its steady resilience. The fox with its sharp reflexes. The panther with its silence. None gave the fortified defense he needed. Then he recalled the small creatures that survived on impossible burdens. Ants. Tiny bodies that lifted mountains of weight compared to their size. Nature's own miracle of multiplied force.

He inhaled and began aligning his breath to the rhythm of the ant. His mind replayed every memory of dissected specimens, every detail of exoskeletal leverage, anchor-muscle distribution, joint locking, and structural compression that allowed an ant to magnify strength far beyond its scale.

Instant Master reacted. His breath aligned. His body hummed in pain. He laid down, letting his body adjust, biting his teeth.

Hours passed. His heartbeat slowed into the deep consistency of consummation. The moment it locked in place, pain surged through him. Not the pain of injury. The pain of a body rewriting its own laws.

When the rhythm settled, he opened his eyes.

His defense was unchanged, but his attack force magnified eightfold. A punch would break his own bones. But a spear thrown under this rhythm would carry the full amplification without returning force to his joints. He smiled as he knew that his attack power would increase by twice with every tier increase. He sighed as he could feel the load on his body for having three breaths. But he also found solace in the face that he felt that his speed of refining his body increased as he used his reserved energy in his body.

He breathed once more. The exhaustion settled. The fear washed out of him. Ant's Breath had chosen him as much as he had chosen it.

He needed more power but at least for now, it seemed that just having more breathing techniques at the consummation stage was enough to push his forging forward without any limit. Even Sahir had his strength limited at 40 tons or something even if his breath was at the perfection stage, one stage below consummation. He looked outside his window, the academy bells rang the final hour before nightfall.

He tied his boots, adjusted his clothes, and stepped out into the courtyard.

Tomorrow, the hunt would take him into the forest.

Tonight, he walked with a rhythm that no longer feared the dark.

CHAPTER 10

Gerald arrived early enough that the morning mist had not yet thinned. The suit he wore sat on him like a borrowed memory, immaculate only because he needed the illusion of composure. His steps were even, betraying nothing of the wariness he carried, nothing of the life he had abandoned, nothing of the dead wife whose absence never left his chest. The knights were gathered ahead of him, their armor dull under the gray sky, their breath steady in disciplined cadence. The hunting banner swayed with the weight of royal authority, a silent reminder that once the forest opened, no mistake would be forgiven.

Maria waited among them, posture straight, expression steady. Her presence did not belong to someone of her age; it belonged to a woman who had already chosen her burden. The emblem at her throat marked her family and its influence, and she wore it openly, not for pride but as a shield which she meant to use to show her support for Gerald. She had come here because she believed that standing beside him publicly would dissuade those who wished to press him or test him. The intent was simple, almost naïve, but it carried enough sincerity that avoiding her felt like cruelty.

He did it anyway.

Gerald stopped beside her and lowered his voice until only she could hear it.

“Maria, keep your distance from me today.”

There was no pause, no softening. He said it as a man who had already measured the consequence of every word. “I am not looking for company. I am not looking for anyone. Do not stand beside me again.”

Her posture did not break, but her fingers tightened around the shaft of her spear. Maria searched his face the way someone searches for a hidden wound.

“You are pushing me away,” she said quietly.

“I am,” he answered. “And you should let me.”

He opened his mouth as if he might add something, but the nearness of her scent of polished leather and the faint warmth of her breath made his younger body respond with a tight, involuntary shift of muscle. His fingers curled once at his side, as though resisting a pull he did not want.

The disgust came a heartbeat later, sharp and instinctive, not for her but for the betrayal of his own flesh. He stepped back before the reaction could settle, the movement abrupt enough that Maria blinked.

Whatever she saw in his eyes made her shoulders stiffen. Her spine straightened, her grip steadied, and the clarity of her gaze narrowed into something colder, an understanding shaped not by hurt, but by the realization that he was pushing her away with every part of himself.

Maria held her place, silent and unreadable.

Gerald's jaw tightened. He turned and walked past her, the aversion in his steps a clean line

Barry heard enough to seize the moment. He pushed through the line with the urgency of a boy who desperately wanted an audience, chest lifted high as if posture alone proved devotion. His gaze locked on Maria first seeking the smallest flicker of approval from her eyes. He snapped to Gerald with theatrical outrage.

"So that is how you treat a lady? She approaches you, and you push her aside?"
His voice trembled, not with anger but with the strain of trying to appear bold in front of a woman who barely looked at him.

Maria exhaled sharply, the kind of breath that hid exhaustion beneath its steadiness. Her eyes did not rise to Barry. She stared at the ground, jaw tight, as if the earth might answer questions a man like him never could. There was heartbreak in the way her shoulders dipped for a fraction of a second, and frustration in how she forced them straight again.

Barry mistook the silence for encouragement.

"I will not stand by while someone insults you, Maria. If he lacks manners, then I shall…"

Maria finally lifted her gaze. The look she gave him stopped his words midsentence. It was not gratitude. It was not admiration. It was the quiet disdain a tired woman gives a dog that keeps circling her heels, believing its persistence is affection.

"Barry," she said, tone flat, "not every moment requires you."

He flinched, but only for a heartbeat. His pride reassembled itself shakily, turning brittle as he swung his attention back to Gerald.

"You think you can ignore her like she is nothing?" he said, louder now, trying to carve authority out of desperation. "Is that how a man is supposed to act?"

Gerald did not answer. He only studied Barry's face, noting the raw desperation in his eyes—desperation to prove something, to be seen as more than a boy who followed Maria like a loyal

hound. Barry's resentment sharpened the longer Gerald remained silent, as if the lack of reaction was the deepest insult possible.

Maria stepped back, her expression tightening with a mix of pity and something colder, a barrier raised against whatever turmoil churned under her ribs. How could she look up to someone who followed her like a dog without dignity.

Barry saw none of that.

He only saw her standing near him and mistook proximity for favor.

He drew in a breath, squared his shoulders, and tried again, forcing anger into his voice as though he could forge love out of rage.

"He should at least apologize to you," Barry insisted, his voice cracking faintly. "Anyone with a shred of decency would."

Maria closed her eyes for a moment, long enough that Gerald understood what she truly felt.

She was not angry at being rejected.

She was angry that Barry thought she needed rescuing at all.

"Barry. You should leave. He is not someone you can touch."

Maria turned away after saying the words. For her, Barry was nothing more than a dog that wails his tails to her for affection without any shred of dignity.

Gerald watched the heir's expression harden, the way the jaw tightened in that fragile mix of pride and embarrassment that young nobles often mistook for righteousness.

The group shifted when Paul arrived. Paul commanded the attention of the circle without effort. His body belonged to the twenty-ton realm, and it showed in the gravity of his stance and the stillness in his eyes. He greeted Gerald with a measured nod, the kind given between equals rather than strangers. The consummation of any breath was respected across all lines, even if achieved in obscurity. Paul acknowledged that silently.

Paul stepped between them with the quiet authority of a man who had cut through more battles than arguments. He placed a hand on Barry's shoulder first, not to restrain him, but to interrupt his spiraling attempt at pride.

"Barry," Paul said, voice level, "Gerald reached consummation at his age. That is not something you dismiss, nor something you antagonize. Men like him do not stay small. They rise. And those who stand beside them rise as well."

Barry stiffened, unsure whether he was being corrected or reminded of his own limits. Paul did not give him time to decide.

He turned toward Gerald next. “And you would do well to understand that Barry is not just another youth in the academy. The Roxton family has produced lords for five generations. They will continue to do so long after we are dust. An ally here is worth more than half the academy.”

Barry lifted his chin slightly, pride flickering back into place, though the insecurity beneath it remained raw. Gerald simply looked at Paul, expression unchanged.

Seeing neither man respond, Paul sighed softly through his nose.

He stepped closer to Gerald, lowering his voice so only he could hear.
The words came without any measure theatrics, almost weary.

“Young man… it is not wise to make an enemy of the Roxton family,” Paul whispered. “They have power that stretches far beyond this hunt, and you will feel their pressure long before you learn how to counter it. Consider a truce before this becomes a road you cannot step off.”

Gerald’s silence was his answer.

Beside them, Barry pretended he had not heard anything, pretended he had not been reminded of his own dependency on the weight of his ancestors. He locked his jaw, choosing the dignity of ignorance.

Paul looked at the two boys one destined to rise by merit, the other by blood and recognized the futility of his attempt. Barry’s father was born a knight with 20 tons. The boy shall rise to become a knight with at least 40 tons. Either side could have benefitted if they let their pride go. He stepped back with the quiet resignation of a teacher who knew pride was a beast that ate warnings whole.

“Very well,” he said. “Let the forest teach what words cannot.”

He turned away, and the party resumed its march.

Gerald counted five students including himself. Four of them watched him discreetly, forming early opinions they would later pretend not to hold. He ignored their assessment. His attention was on the weapon issued to him. The academy sword, built of vital steel, carried a weight far greater than its metal; it could withstand fifteen tons of force and cost more than a working family could earn in a decade. He could not sell it, not legally or morally, and he did not intend to. The wooden spears strapped to his back looked almost comical in comparison, and Barry smirked at his spear while showing his steel spear to Gerald.

Barry walked forward with his friend in toe, saying, “The muddy people do make the noble knights dirty. They carry the spears of the bloody hunters. ”

Gerald said nothing. Common wood had saved more lives than decorated steel.

The group crossed into the forest under the protection of royal decree. The boundary stone marked where civilization ended and the law of movement began. The forest breathed in its own

rhythm, each pulse shaped by the life it held. Gerald adjusted his stance, hands steady, expression unchanged.

The attack came without warning.

A dragonfly as large as an ox plunged from the canopy, its wings vibrating with enough force to make the nearby branches tremble. Sixteen tons of aggressive momentum rushed toward Barry before the boy even registered the shadow above him. Paul moved instantly, the ground cracking under his step, but Gerald had already measured the distance, the angle, the velocity. He understood one thing with clarity: Barry could not die here. A dead heir was a political explosion that would burn through every layer of society around Gerald, and he had no desire to become the spark.

He drew a wooden spear.

The muscles in his arm screamed as he hurled it, and the force he produced overshot what bone could tolerate. His hand fractured in the motion; he felt the bone shift, felt the tendons strain, felt the pain lance through him in a clean white thread. But the spear struck the dragonfly mid-flight, piercing where the wing met the torso, and the creature crashed into the ground with a heavy crack. Paul halted mid-step, half-surprised at the precision.

Gerald lowered his arm. Blood slid down his wrist, but the healing ability born from consummation crawled through his flesh like a quiet fire, sealing what had broken. By the time anyone reached him, his fingers moved again without tremor.

Barry looked at the dead fly in doubt. *How was Gerald so strong?* Barry's fear and fury rose fast enough to feel like heat. His shoulders trembled with the humiliation of being saved by the very man he had tried to belittle. His mouth worked before his reason caught up, and he threw the weight of his lineage at Gerald as if ancestry were a blade.

"My grandfather stands at fifty tons," Barry said, the words strained by pride that was struggling to stay upright. "He will live for two more centuries. You can climb all you want. You will still stand beneath my family. Remember that when you dream."

He spoke of influence with a tightness around his eyes, as if the threat itself could steady him. "Doors shall remain closed to you while you try to rise higher. The only thing left for you would be to live and die as a country-noble."

Gerald watched the outburst with a small smile that held no warmth. It did not lift his expression. It only tightened it, the way cold iron tightens when struck.

He stepped closer, enough that Barry's breath caught.

"Listen carefully," Gerald said, voice low and even. "I do not like Maria."

Barry's jaw twitched.

"I am not interested in her," Gerald continued. His tone remained calm, but there was something behind it that made Barry freeze.

Gerald tilted his head slightly, eyes steady. "But if you push me too far, I might take her anyway. Once or twice. Not for pleasure. Not for romance. Only to make sure you understand that you are not the only one who can ruin something precious."

Barry reared back as if the air itself had struck him. The color drained from his face, leaving him pale in a way that made his expression suddenly honest.

"I do not care for her," he said quickly. "You misunderstand. I do not feel anything for her."

The lie clung to his voice, brittle and thin. Gerald did not bother to correct him.

He simply stepped back. His gaze did not linger. His breathing did not change. The threat had already been delivered, and the meaning had already taken root.

Gerald turned to meet Paul's gaze.

Paul had watched the exchange in silence, and when it ended he turned his head slightly, just enough for Gerald to see the strain in his expression. The disgust was not loud, not dramatic, but it lingered in the tight line around Paul's mouth and in the faint lowering of his gaze as if the ground were easier to look at than either of the boys standing before him.

He looked at Barry first. The disappointment in his eyes was unmistakable. A noble heir saved from death had offered not gratitude but petulance, and the teacher's jaw flexed with the effort it took to swallow the thought. Then Paul's attention drifted to Gerald, and the disgust deepened rather than eased.

Gerald met the gaze without flinching. There was no apology in his posture.

Paul's shoulders rose slightly with his breath. The motion was controlled, but the irritation beneath it sharpened the air. Gerald could imagine the man thinking that a woman who stepped forward despite her family's pressure deserved better treatment than to be used as leverage. Paul did not speak it aloud, yet the thought sat plainly in his eyes.

Gerald held still, letting the moment pass. His pulse did not change. His breathing did not quicken. Only the faint twitch of his hand betrayed anything beneath the surface.

He sees me as someone who stains what protects him. He sees Barry as someone who bites the hand that pulled him from death. He is not wrong.

Paul shook his head once, a small, weary gesture that carried more weight than scolding ever could. It was the gesture of a teacher who had hoped for dignity and had watched it rot on both sides.

Gerald felt the man's judgment settle over him, heavy enough to make the air taste metallic.

I did what I swore I would never do. I threatened something pure, something undeserved, just to carve out a margin of safety. I climbed, but I climbed in the dark.

He let out a slow breath. The wry smile that touched his lips was thin and humorless.

If this is the cost of refusing to kneel, then I will carry it. I have carried worse.

Paul walked away without another word, leaving them both standing in the quiet he abandoned behind him. Gerald did not call after him. He only watched the man's back fade into the trees and wondered, for the briefest moment, how much lower he might need to sink before his path reached any light at all.

Gerald turned away, leaving Barry frozen where he stood.

He approached the corpse of the dragonfly. The creature's shell was thick with condensed vitality. Its meat would be precious, powerful fuel for anyone attempting to rise. He looked at it without excitement. He thought only of the problem it posed: how he would eat it, how he would convert its energy, how he would make this kill mean something beyond the moment.

The forest was dim. The air smelled of sap and blood.

His path ahead had darkened, and the weight on his shoulders had only grown heavier. He had been ready to die once. Now he had found a reason to live. That reason demanded victory, and he would not allow himself to lose the very thing he had chosen to fight for.

He turned away from the corpse and walked deeper into the shadows of the forest. He cannot become an animal eating such corpses. He cannot also let his integrity be lost as he had now. it seemed his future was dark. He simply wanted to sleep but this young body kept him awake.

He had to return to the team. He shall make it up for Maria in some other manner.

Chapter 11

Gerald stepped out of the trees with the dragonfly's wings slung across his back as if it were a bundle of firewood. The creature's wings, thin and translucent, still wet from the nerves he had severed. It appeared as a translucent material and shone brightly here and then when under the sunlight as he walked.

The clearing fell quiet the moment he appeared. The other students stared at the collapsed wing, then at his hands, then at the folds of muscle that showed through his shirt whenever he shifted the weight. They had seen dragonflies before. They knew how hard they were to kill. Knights with ten tons of strength found it troublesome. Lords above that could break their joints but not catch them easily. Gerald walked with none of the breath of a lord and yet carried one home.

Paul who had returned early after advising to take the wings, stood beside the target racks. His jaw tightened. His eyes moved from the torn wing to Gerald's calm face. That brief, silent judgment did not last long, but it stung sharper than a spoken insult. He turned away from Gerald as if the sight were something distasteful. He spoke to no one. He issued no orders. He simply stepped aside so the handlers could inspect the carcass.

Gerald lowered the wing onto the platform. Wood groaned under the weight. The tendons writhed slightly as the last traces of stored vitality drained away. He straightened slowly, gave the handlers room, and waited in silence.

Footsteps rushed from the side path. Maria approached fast, breathing unsteady, pale from having run the whole distance. She halted only when she felt how cold and rigid Gerald stood.

"Are you hurt?" she asked. "I told you not to go further with Barry. You did not listen."

Gerald removed a piece of dried membrane from his sleeve. "I am unhurt."

Her eyes fell to the cut on his knuckles where the dragonfly's wings had been scraped him. He kept his hand at his side, leaving no chance for her to reach it. She stepped back, understanding without being told. Her throat moved once as she swallowed whatever she wanted to say next.

Two boys approached from behind the handlers. Their clothes were clean, their movements disciplined, their posture showing noble breeding. Timothy and Richard. Sons of a thirty ton lord, trained since childhood to think three steps into the future.

Timothy nodded toward the carcass. "You killed that alone."

“I did,” Gerald said.

“No trap,” Richard said. “No help.”

“None,” Gerald answered.

The handlers tore open the wing membrane. Their eyes widened at the depth of the tear. Gerald had not sliced it with a blade. He had crushed the tendons with raw force, twisting the joint until it snapped. It was the kind of damage only a ten ton knight could inflict with bare hands.

Richard studied Gerald’s forearm. “Your breathing technique has reached Consummation, right? No wonder Lord Sahir put in a word for you.”

“Yes,” Gerald said.

“That gives amplification,” Richard said. “With Consummation, even eight tons can strike like twelve.”

Gerald did not respond. He let them draw their own conclusions.

Timothy’s voice softened. “Your refinement is at hunter level. But strength at knight level is indeed something to be worthy about. Though your bloodline has not been enhanced, your strength is another strong. You have the foundation for Tier Four. You only lack the food that our houses receive before you reach that level of bloodline sanctification.”

Gerald met his gaze without flinching. Timothy smiled faintly. Not in superiority, only in recognition of someone walking the same path by harsher means.

“You should join us next hunt,” Timothy said. “Someone who kills alone is better as an ally than an unknown.”

Richard added, “Stronger people will take interest. It is better to have friends standing behind you before that happens.”

Gerald asked cynically, “What kind of people?”

Richard replied, “The unworthy kind. They will want you to swear fealty to them. Some might even want to conscript you to war.”

Gerald asked, “Is not strength enough?”

Timothy’s mouth pulled into a thin line. “Strength is enough for a fight. It is not enough for a world.”

Richard folded his arms. “Those with power rarely look at raw talent with goodwill. They look at it like a loose blade. Useful, but dangerous if not pointed in the right direction.”

Timothy nodded. “Strong people invite stronger eyes. Powerful families watch these hunts. They send messages to their sons and daughters, asking who is rising.”

Richard added, “A new knight is tolerable. A new knight who refines faster than his peers is a threat. That is how nobles think.”

Gerald looked between them. “You assume too much of me.”

Timothy smiled faintly. “You carried that thing across the forest. That is more than enough.”

Richard tapped the side of the wing with his boot. “This carcass marks you. Do you think they will believe you are ordinary now?”

Gerald asked again, “If strength is not enough, then what is?”

Timothy answered, “Position. Family name. Resources. Allies who are willing to speak for you when you are not present.”

Richard added, “And a teacher who does not hate you. You have none of those things.”

Timothy gave a short breath that carried a shadow of amusement. “You have the strength of a young knight. But without support you will be seen as a free asset. Some lords will want to claim you. Others will want to cage you.”

Richard leaned closer and lowered his voice. “There are houses in Lowmere that use forced oaths. They bind talented commoners to their cause. If someone like you walks alone, they may try.”

Timothy gestured toward the distant academy buildings. “This place looks civil. It is not. Politics begin the moment someone becomes valuable.”

Gerald asked, “Why tell me this?”

Timothy shrugged. “Because you walked up that hill with a dead monster and no fear. That is the kind of man someone will try to drag into their banners.”

Richard nodded. “If you stand with us, it becomes troublesome for others to approach you with chains behind their smiles.”

Gerald looked at them steadily. “And what do you expect in return?”

Timothy’s expression softened. “Nothing that costs you. Only presence. If you stand with us during hunts, people will know you chose your own circle.”

Richard added, “And if someone tries to approach you with bad intentions, we will know before you do.”

Gerald asked, “Why would you help me?”

Timothy answered, “Because you are worth the trouble.”

Richard said, “And because making an enemy of you now would be foolish. Better to be beside you than behind you.”

Timothy offered a hand. “One hunt together is enough. After that, choose as you wish.”

Gerald hesitated a moment. Timothy did not force the gesture. Richard waited with the calm patience of someone who knew the outcome.

Gerald finally placed his hand in Timothy’s.

Timothy’s grip tightened once, firm without dominance. “Good. Then when we hunt next, stand with us. It will quiet those who are watching.”

Richard stepped back with a satisfied nod. “And it will make those who plan to approach you think twice.”

Timothy added, “Strength alone is enough to kill a beast. To survive people, you need more than strength. You need position.”

Gerald withdrew his hand. “Then we will see how the next hunt goes.”

Richard rested his hand on the edge of the drying rack. “One more thing. Do not slow your path just because you gained a rare Consummation trait. Force amplification is useful, yes, but it is not the foundation of strength in this kingdom.”

Gerald looked at him. “What foundation do you mean.”

“Bloodline strengthening,” Richard said. “Ten tons is where the body becomes something new. That is why knights are treated as semi nobles. Their blood does not pass ordinary traits. It

passes stability. Children of knights are almost always born with cleaner bodies and sharper senses. They grow into strength faster than commoners even before they start breathing."

Timothy added, "It is not written in books because the academy wants students to climb without arrogance. But every noble knows this. Tier Four is the true threshold. Once someone reaches thirty tons, the body is no longer human in the old sense. Their children do not struggle to reach ten ton. They reach it by growth alone."

Richard nodded. "Those children are guaranteed to become knights by the time they are adults. Not because of training. Because of inheritance! That is why real nobles treat Tier Four with such reverence."

Timothy traced a line across the membrane of the dragonwing. "And Tier Five is another world entirely. A fifty ton body becomes a living reservoir. Their children grow toward twenty tons even without cultivation. Not guaranteed, but near certain. Those families hold power for generations even if a few descendants waste their potential."

Richard looked Gerald in the eyes. "Your Consummation gives you efficiency. It gives you precision. It even lets you hit above your level. But that alone does not make a noble's path. You must reach the point where your body rewrites itself."

Timothy lowered his voice. "And when you reach Tier Four, the academies begin to watch. The nobles begin to watch. Even kings take interest. If you stop before that, they will say your talent was wasted. If you reach it, they will say you were born for more."

Richard stepped back and gave a small, approving nod. "So keep forging. Do not let the amplification make you complacent. It is rare, yes, but rarity is not destiny. Thirty tons is."

Timothy smiled lightly. "And if you reach that stage, you will not need protection from anyone. People will watch their words around you instead."

Gerald absorbed their words in silence. The two nobles waited for a response, but none came.

Timothy accepted the quiet. “Good. That is enough for today.”

Richard turned toward the path, motioning for Timothy to follow. “Come on. Let the man breathe. He has already killed something that would make most knights run.”

They walked away without waiting for farewell, leaving Gerald beside the drying racks, the wing membrane catching faint light as the wind moved through its veins.

They returned to the academy in the open. They did not hide their spoils. They had spent a week hunting.

The clearing slowly returned to normal. Students gathered in small circles, whispering behind lowered voices. Paul passed by Gerald without looking at him. His silence was sharper than any rebuke. It did not bother Gerald. He had not killed for admiration. He had killed to measure the next threshold.

Gerald left the platform once the handlers finished weighing the wing. He walked down the path toward the dormitory. He felt eyes on him, but none dared block his way.

Maria stood near the fence as he passed. She did not try to speak again. She only dipped her head slightly, a gesture that lingered between concern and resignation.

Gerald returned the gesture with a single quiet nod. Nothing more.

He reached the dormitory door and stopped when he saw a man waiting by the entrance. The man stood still, robes folded neatly, posture calm as desert stone. Sahir Al Kharrim. His presence carried the silence of dunes, heavy and measured.

Sahir’s eyes traced Gerald from head to foot, not judging the blood or the scent of vital decay but weighing the rhythm beneath his breath. Gerald saw recognition in the instructor’s gaze. Not admiration. Familiarity. Two people far from the homes that shaped them.

Sahir held out a small stone, pale blue inside, pulsing faintly like a heartbeat wrapped in glass. “Take it. You earned more than you were given.”

Gerald accepted it with both hands. The stone hummed once against his palm, a vibration that slipped into his bones.

Sahir watched the faint shimmer of Gerald's breath shift when the crystal touched his palm. His eyes softened with a quiet satisfaction. "I am glad for you. Few young men wield two perfected rhythms at once. Your talent was not exaggerated by the others."

Gerald studied the man's calm face. Sahir had never pressed him for answers, never cornered him with curiosity. For the first time since coming to the academy, he felt no threat beneath a teacher's gaze.

He made a decision.

"I have three," Gerald said.

Sahir's brows rose slightly. There was no disbelief in his expression, only a steady acceptance. "Three Consummations. That explains your refinement. You carry rhythms that should not coexist. No wonder the world bends differently when you breathe."

Gerald tightened his grip on the crystal.

This is a risk. But he will learn it sooner or later. Better that he hears it from me. I will soon reach thirteen tons. With amplification my strike will carry sixteen. Even if I am wounded, no one who stands close will survive.

Sahir nodded slowly, as though receiving a truth he had been waiting for. "Your path will be heavier than you think. But you have built it correctly from the start. Use that crystal well. Your efficiency has risen. It will carry you past the twelve ton threshold."

Gerald did not look away. "It will."

Sahir stepped back. His robes shifted with the slow patience of desert winds settled after a long journey. “Do not squander the day that is coming. A stride like this carves a new place in the world.”

He left without another word.

Gerald closed the dormitory door softly. The crystal glowed against his palm, casting an unsteady blue ring across the floor. He sat on the edge of the bed and let the pulse of its stored vitality seep into him. His breath aligned with it almost immediately.

Thirteen tons. A body that crosses this threshold does not retreat again. With sixteen times of amplified force, even wounded, I can silence anyone who stands before me. A step bought with knowledge and blood. A step I earned alone.

The stone warmed. The first threads of refinement began to move through his muscles and bones.

Night deepened outside the window.

His path sharpened.

For the first time since arriving at the academy, he felt the weight of isolation loosen. He was no longer unseen. He was becoming something the world would have to acknowledge.

CHAPTER 12

Dusk settled like cold cloth over the academy dormitory. Gerald sat on the narrow pallet beside the window where a single strip of evening light still slid across cracked plaster. He folded his hands, closed his eyes, and began the practiced cycle he had done in secret a hundred times and yet never with this insistence.

Alligator's Breath first. His ribs drew tight and shallow, each inhale an edge, each exhale a sheath. He pictured the creature's slow, patient stillness and let the image anchor his chest. The energy sheathed itself around his forearms and sternum as a feeling more than a sight. It was the sensation of being held by cool leather, taut and ready.

Axolotl's Breath followed. The inhalation lengthened. He imagined slow water and embryonic pulse, the way a wounded thing closed itself and mended. The heat behind his sternum changed tone; no longer the thin temper of fighting, but the warm, absorbing hum of repair.

Ant's Breath last. He did not look for subtlety. He called the all-consuming laboring rhythm, the sense of carrying hills inside the belly. Muscles contracted as if they remembered weight they had never known. The breath became a drum, then a slow tide.

These three together were a knot of contradiction. The defensive coil of the alligator, the yielding renewal of the axolotl, the blunt, patient might of the ant. Gerald did not think of theory. He let the rhythms press against one another until something inside him—and impossibly precise and biological—gave.

Bones vibrated. It began with a tremor beneath his feet and climbed the spine, a comb of sensation that tuned every vertebra. It did not hurt. It felt like a machine aligning itself while still running. His skeleton tightened and clarified as if new microfilaments had threaded through marrow. Under the skin something was weaving with a patient hand. Fibers knit into patterns he had no name for, but the pattern read as strength.

Blood ran hot and clean. Heat like coin melted in his veins and then settled, precise, like molten bronze poured and cooled into a better shape. Breath slowed. Each inhale grew longer and deeper until his chest rose and fell like the patient swell of tide.

His hair tinged, first at the temples, then through the mid-lengths. Blue threaded the black and did so without ceremony. His eyes sharpened, the brown melting to a marine depth that surprised him when the light caught them. Muscle lines refined themselves into angles that suggested sculpture rather than mere flesh. The jaw resolved along a straight plane. He did not feel taller so much as more exact. His skin smoothed and took on a faint polish, a reflection that drank the lamp light.

He stood without thinking. The mirror shard by the wash basin showed him a stranger who might be carved from stone. He tipped his head, examined the new planes of his face, and murmured, voice low and even, that he looked like a Greek statue.

The thought did not swell into vanity. It settled as an observation. He recognized a different thing moving in his blood. A lineage he had never considered had altered. Where there had been restless youth there was now an older calm. His aura felt older, less like a feverish flare and more like a settled hearth. Posture changed by the smallest increment. He breathed slower. His gaze fixed with a balance he could measure and did not question.

Alligator's Breath left a gift. When he flexed his forearms and breathed out in a deliberate line, he saw for the first time a faint, thin shimmer fold across skin and bone. It caught in the angle of the light like morning mist clinging to metal. It was not visible all the time. Only at an angle did the edge of it show. He tested it by tilting his arm. The sheen contracted like tightened leather. It was a shield in miniature.

Axolotl's Breath delivered a borrowed miracle. He cupped his hands and pushed a soft breath into his palms. The warmth that rose there was not his alone. He laid the hands above the wooden stool and felt, as if by a distant channel, a thread pull taut between skin and grain. Life answered. He did not yet know to whom he might give it, but when his palms glowed faintly as if with slow bioluminescence he understood a second technique had opened. He could heal.

Ant's Breath remained honest. It offered no trick. It left raw solidity and the sober understanding that some gifts were blunt and unembellished. He noted that without disappointment and moved on.

Shock touched him, a brief flaring that made his throat tighten. Acceptance followed. Pride came after that, quiet and measured like the puff of a soldier settling arms after inspection. A sense of responsibility settled in his chest. Strength had come, but it was not indulgence. It sat like a tool one would use without fuss.

When he left the dormitory the corridors smelled of oil and old stone. Lanterns burned in glass niches, their amber fingers stroking the flags and banners of students who trained for different breaths. His steps felt lighter than they should for a man who had spent years under the weight of doubt. People glanced up and their eyes lingered as if to check an error. A scholar looked twice and did not hide the surprise. A squire broke into a smile and then, ashamed, busied himself with a task.

He could hear heartbeats now in a way that had not been possible before. Not consciously, not as a neat map, but like a field that focused the farther he walked. Each beat was a note in the hall song. He kept his face even. Internally he was buoyant and calm by equal measure. Becoming a knight pressed into him like cold brass: heavy in consequence and clear in purpose.

He thought briefly of food and of the ledger of meat and coin ahead. Of the slow arithmetic that would feed a newly refined frame. Strength required supply. Strength required choices. He planned his confession and his small inventory of needs. He would tell Sahir before the evening fire cooled.

Sahir met him in the practice yard. The scholar walked with the measured step of a man who taught more by stillness than by talk. He took in Gerald's appearance as one might read the margins of a manuscript. His eyes widened, then narrowed, then returned to their habitual calm. He walked slow circles around Gerald, not to probe but to observe.

“I have crossed thirteen tons,” Gerald said, the sentence even and carried without flourish. “My breathing controlled it and my body completed the refinement. I am a knight now.”

Sahir’s surprise hid itself beneath the scholar’s mask. He measured the voice and the breath and then said, as if reading a conclusion from the margins, “Then your scholarship ends here. A knight no longer falls under academy care. Still, you now carry strength that may let you live long.”

Gerald accepted the fact without fanfare. “Even if my stipend ends, I can stand tall now. There must be something I can do to repay what you have given me.”

Sahir inclined his head as if weighing options. “There is nothing that can repay knowledge. What you can do is find a path that sustains you. If you want security, the safest choice is joining the Hunter Knights under the royal banner. They hunt monsters across the kingdom. A knight is welcomed there.”

Is there a way to avoid joining the king’s banner, Gerald asked with controlled honesty. He could feel the older rhythm in his blood answering this truth without drama.

Sahir stiffened then, the scholar’s mask slipping to show a frown he did not wholly conceal. “Why would you avoid such a stable place.”

Gerald’s voice did not flare. He did not speak in rebellion. He spoke in the steady calibration of someone recounting fact. “I grew in a land where we never knelt. My body may have changed, but that part of me has not.”

A sting registered on Sahir’s face. He took the remark for arrogance at first. His breathing grew heavier. His hand tapped the staff he always carried when thinking. Then he calmed, as though rethreading his own rhythm deliberately.

“Speak clearly. Is something troubling you,” he said after a moment.

Gerald met him without theatrical heat. “I am simply not made for kneeling. I can salute. I cannot kneel.”

Sahir’s eyes softened and then sharpened in the same motion. He had grown attached to this boy to not treat him as a tool but he could not let his investment in his go to waste. He sought a middle road. “Then perhaps the royal banner is not for you. House Veyne trains wolf-breath generals. They need hunters in the Obsidian Forest.”

Gerald shook his head at that proposition before Sahir finished. “I do not wish to go that far.”

Sahir sighed slow and long enough to sound like someone consulting weather. “Can you not do it.”

“You are not just my teacher,” Gerald said quietly. “You are my friend. I can heal now. I want a path that lets me keep that bond without kneeling to anyone.”

Sahir considered the word friend as though tasting it. He nodded, thoughtful and precise. “Then this is the middle road. I can send you as a free healer. I will introduce you myself. You will not kneel. You will only salute, and you will owe nothing to any lord.”

Relief and gratitude showed in Gerald’s nod. He bowed slightly in the scholar’s measured way and left the yard.

Outside the gate Maria saw him first. Her mouth fell open and she gripped the lintel until her knuckles went white. When she found his face his calm reply was a small nod. The knees that had nearly failed at the sight did not find purchase this time. She could not form words. The sight of his refined body pulled breath like tide.

Dickard stepped forward and did not hide his appraisal. “Barrowfield is a house of cavalry commanders. You are not suited for them.”

Gerald answered with the same plainness that guided him. “I have no interest in women now.”

The man studied him and read sincerity into the small thing. “Then someone has whispered false rumors. Still, my warning stands. That family expects loyalty and ambition.”

“I am not shaken by such talk,” Gerald said. No pride inflated. No indignation flamed. He took the statement as data.

Dickard measured him then differently. Respect collected in the lines of the older man’s face. He offered a practical course. “If that is so, then tell me this. Would you consider joining the cavalry yourself. A knight is valued there. You can earn a full suit of armor and a trained horse. You will also gain access to food stores.”

Gerald did not pretend ignorance to the ledger of survival. He had heard the grim arithmetic of meat and strength. “For me to reach thirty tons I need ten tons of food,” Dickard continued without softening. “Lords restrict food accumulation. No one can hoard food freely. Even with coin the laws will choke you. Your growth was sped by Sahir’s crystal output. Without it you would be weak.”

Gerald listened and let the truth settle. He had no combat experience to mask the gap between muscle and mastery. He raised his chin to the night light and stated the fact he had rehearsed in the quiet hours.

“I will not kneel.”

Dickard’s gaze sharpened and then he cast a challenge with a farmer’s bluntness. “Then how will you ascend. Even if you hunt low monsters, you must eat nearly fifteen tons of their meat. They contain less energy than farmed beasts. No lord will let you hunt on their land. Are you strong enough to kill something that can kill you with a single mistake.”

Gerald did not answer with bluff. He said instead, low and certain, “I have a plan.” He turned away before Dickard could press him for details. The corridor swallowed his silhouette. His blue hair caught the lamp glow and burned like a private flag.

He had six months in this world, he thought to himself in the second person that had become the way he counted things. He had reached thirteen tons because of helping hands and because he let a teacher’s light touch him though he saw Sahir more of a friend than a teacher.. The path ahead is costly and measured in meat and law. He had to keep walking.

He kept walking into the corridor light. The new weight of his life pressed on his shoulders, less a burden than a draft to follow. The academy doors clicked behind him. The night folded itself to his back.

Chapter 13

Gerald sat beneath the wide branches at the edge of the academy grounds. The sword rested across his knees, its weight colder than the dawn wind. He watched the forest line and measured his thoughts with the same caution he used when measuring breath. Every path he considered ended in the same quiet ache. The sword did not belong to him. He could not carry it into the forest without feeling as if he had stolen another man's will.

Tremur, the academy's canine guard, watched him from a short distance. The old hound lowered his head and stared with an expression that carried more judgment than any instructor ever had. Gerald let out a long breath. His chest tightened, not from fear, but from the simple knowledge of how little strength he possessed. Strength had once answered for him. Strength had once made decisions. Now he had none. A man without money was a man without freedom. He had learned that lesson too many times already.

He placed the sword beside the academy gate. His fingers rested on the hilt for a moment longer than necessary, and the quiet refusal in his chest was almost painful. A younger version of himself might have swallowed his pride and begged for a chance to rise again. He had done similar things once, long ago, when he took control of a research team through pure competence and patience. But kneeling for power felt unbearable now. He had lived in isolation before arriving in this world. He had buried the desire for humiliation along with Sarah.

His steps were slow as he walked away from the academy. The moment he passed the gate, he felt the reality settle: the path toward a knight's life was already behind him. The ruined dignity of that truth clung to him like rain.

He thought of Sarah then. The thought rose without permission. He wanted nothing more than to rest beside her and let the world continue without him. Yet the desire to fade away was hollow. He knew himself too well to trust it. He was a man who searched for meaning even as he claimed to reject it.

He reached the road that led toward the village inn. The sun was lowering behind the distant fields when Roth found him.

Roth's boots struck the ground with sharp steps. His expression carried no patience.

“You left,” Roth said. “You passed the trials. You qualified as a knight. And then you chose nothing. Are you truly that craven?”

Gerald did not look away. Roth’s anger washed over him with the force of a man who had built his life upon duty. Gerald simply stood there, breathing evenly.

“I cannot serve a kingdom,” Gerald said. “I have no desire to pledge my life to anyone. I have a healing technique. I intend to use it for ordinary people. They deserve treatment without paying a noble’s ransom.”

Roth scoffed and folded his arms. “You want to live as a village healer. That is your grand future.”

“I shall be seated in this royal city though I plan to accept private visits through Teacher Sahir.”

“It is foolish,” Roth muttered. But there was a grudging tone in his voice. “Still, you might live. Hunters respect healers more than they respect each other. Knights have families too even if they can heal. It has been long since a healer was born. It is only heard in the legends. Yet I hope that you have not forgotten the plights the village took for sending you here.”

Gerald Plights. They asked for coin. I gave them. They did provide him with food and shelter and a home and he will do enough for them. But that is not the reason enough to be a person bound by their social values.

Roth turned and walked away, shaking his head. The conversation ended without warmth, yet Gerald recognized the reluctant acceptance hidden in Roth’s final remark.

He continued toward the inn, one slow step after another. His mind returned to the forest and the single victory he had claimed there: the moment he killed a dragonfly the size of a lion. He had struck because he knew he could throw. Throwing had never frightened him. Fighting did. He had never faced an opponent equal to him. Not once. Pain did not frighten him either. He had shattered his arms many times during spear training. What frightened him was the moment every fighter lived for: the instant when weapon and enemy aligned, when rhythm and danger merged into a single thread. That moment demanded certainty. He had never possessed it.

He understood his limitations clearly. If he wanted to survive, he needed to follow a rational path: weaker enemies first, stronger ones later. But survival required energy, and energy came from food. Nine tons of refinement needed nine tons of equivalent food. Even if he hunted a monster at twenty tons of strength, its vital energy saturated flesh would be almost inedible. One red lion might give twenty kilograms of usable meat. A single breakthrough would demand hundreds of lions. It was no wonder kingdoms fought tribes over hunting grounds. The world was held together by hunger.

He walked in silence. His mind weighed the gold he owed and the food he needed. A single vital crystal was worth two thousand gold. Sahir had given him one. Repaying that debt would take two years of honest healing work, perhaps more. He would have to mend every wounded hunter and soothe every injured child until the debt cleared.

He stopped walking. The cold evening wind curled around him like a reminder of how small he remained. He thought of rising again one day, stronger than kings, strong enough to force the world to bend. But such hopes belonged to younger men.

Still, he did not stop walking.

He continued toward the inn. Tomorrow, he would begin again.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 – The Empty Forest Line

The forest stood quiet in the late afternoon light. The great trunks swallowed the wind, and the leaves hung still like the breath of a resting giant. Gerald stood in front of the wooden post where hunters pinned notices. He set down the sign he had carved that morning. The words were rough but clear.

Healer available. Payment by agreement.

He had expected someone to approach him with a limp or a bleeding arm. He had even prepared a polite nod for whoever came first. Instead, the first man who walked up was an old hunter with a crooked back and tired eyes. The man squinted at Gerald, then laughed with the softness of someone who had lived too long.

“You heal bones, boy?”

Gerald looked at the man’s trembling fingers. “Let me see your hand.”

The old hunter stretched it forward. His joints crackled when he moved. Gerald placed both palms gently along the knuckles. He inhaled the rhythm of the Axolotl’s Breath. A faint warmth travelled from his wrist to his fingertips. The joints relaxed. The swelling eased. The old man flexed once and blinked.

The pain was gone.

A few hunters nearby murmured, half impressed and half amused at the sight of a stranger using a regeneration rhythm on aching bones. The old hunter chuckled and placed four gold coins in Gerald’s hand.

“I was saving it for my funeral. Better it goes to the living.”

Gerald wanted to thank him properly, but the hunters’ eyes were already turning away. They understood value in silence. They recognized skill without applause. Gerald kept the coins in his pocket and breathed out slowly. Four gold was more than he had expected, but far less than he needed. Two thousand gold stood between him and paying back Sahir. Two thousand gold stood between him and any peaceful night of sleep.

He remained at the post till sunset. A few hunters nodded at him out of politeness, but none were hurt. None needed healing. None provided him with another chance at earning coin.

He went back the next morning, and the next after that. Each time, the air held the same stillness. No groans. No wounded limbs. No desperate voices calling for help.

Only the vast indifference of a forest that did not bleed.

On the fourth day, as he sat with a leather flask of fermented rice on his lap, a small shadow stopped in front of him. He raised his head. A girl stood there with her brother on her back. Her clothes were torn, and her eyes had the hungry courage of someone who had nothing left to lose.

“Can you save him?” she asked. “I only have one silver.”

Gerald looked at the silver she held out. One silver could buy a pound of meat in this land, maybe less if the merchants were cruel that day. He had no reason to take the offer. He had every reason to refuse.

Yet she held up her brother with both arms while her ankles shook. She did not beg. She simply endured.

“Bring him closer,” Gerald said.

The boy’s leg hung at a strange angle. His sister explained in a low voice that he had slipped from a tall fruit tree and crashed onto a jagged root. The fall had torn muscle from bone and left the limb swollen and hot to the touch. Gerald rested his hand on the wound. The Axolotl rhythm stirred inside him and travelled through the injured flesh like warm water seeping into cracked earth. His breath steadied. The torn fibers began to pull together. The swelling eased as the trapped blood found order again. New tissue formed beneath his palm. The boy clenched his teeth, then let out a breath when the pain dissolved into relief.

The girl whispered something that sounded like a prayer and pushed the silver into Gerald’s hand. He closed his fingers around it and said nothing. She left with her brother leaning on her shoulder, the relief on her face shining brighter than the sun above.

Gerald watched her until she vanished behind the tall grass. His palm tightened around the coin.

He had accepted it.

He had done it for one silver.

Hunters nearby observed. Their expressions shifted. They said nothing, but he understood what their silence meant. Tomorrow someone else would come with a twisted ankle and expect the same price. If he refused, they would call it selfishness. If he accepted, he would earn nothing.

He had reduced his own value. He did not resent the girl for it, but the knowledge weighed on him like a stone tied to the ribs.

By the time evening arrived, the forest line was empty. The sun sank behind the tall trunks. The world dimmed. He walked back to his small hut and drank half the flask before he sat down on the ground. His hands trembled only slightly. He had learned to steady them long ago.

“Sarah,” he whispered.

The wind did not move, yet he felt her presence settle beside him. He looked at the empty space next to him as if she were sitting on the same dirt floor.

“You would scold me for thinking like this,” he said. “You always hated when I wanted people to suffer so I could fix them.”

His voice lowered.

“I told myself I would earn more gold today. I thought maybe someone would come with a broken arm or a fever or a hidden fracture. I sat there waiting with a smile, hoping someone would bleed or limp or cry. I hoped for it.”

He let out a breath that shook.

“I am ashamed of that thought. I helped the old hunter. I helped the girl. I know it was right. But I cannot pretend I did not want more. I need the money. I need the strength. I cannot stay weak forever.”

His fingers brushed the air, searching for the shape of her hand.

“You remember what I promised you,” he whispered. “I told you I would save a million lives. You said it was the only wedding gift you wanted, and I said yes because you were smiling and I was too proud to admit I had no idea how to reach that number. Then I became a doctor. Then the research happened. Then the people died. Then I still did what I could. Maybe that counts. Maybe it does not. But I never forgot what you asked from me.”

The drink tightened his throat. He swallowed.

“I will not forget now either.”

The bottle slipped from his fingers and rolled into the corner. He leaned back against the hut wall. The thin wood creaked behind him.

“Do you hear me, Sarah? I will not forget.”

He looked at the door. He thought of how he had gone back to the forest each morning expecting injury and sickness like a merchant expecting customers. He thought of how clean and peaceful the hunters had been.

“It was good no one was hurt,” he murmured. “It truly was. But it made me feel empty. I should be happy the world did not break. Yet I felt disappointment. It makes me a smaller man.”

He closed his eyes.

“You would tell me to keep going. You would tell me to stop counting gold and start counting the people who breathe easier because of me. You would laugh at how I still panic over money in a world I do not even belong to.”

His voice cracked, thin and young in this sixteen-year-old body.

“I miss you.”

Silence answered him. He nodded at the emptiness as if it had spoken.

“I will earn the gold, Sarah. I will repay Sahir. I will become strong enough to walk through this world without fear. When I become strong, I will do what I could not do in my old life. You asked me to save lives. I will carry that until the day I sleep for the last time.”

His head lowered. The light left the sky, and the hut darkened until only the outline of his face remained. His hand rested on the ground, palm open, waiting for a hand that never came.

He whispered one final line, soft and steady, as if promising it to the air.

“I will not forget the gift you asked for.”

Then he fell asleep, leaning against the hut wall, the forest quiet beyond the door and the night holding his words in the dark.

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Chapter 15

Gerald was alerted to the sound of hooves and then a knock. Gerald opened the door when the knock sounded. Sahir stood outside with travel dust on his robe and a familiar tiredness in his eyes. The old man studied Gerald's face and allowed a small smile.

"You have been busy," Sahir said. "Word of you has reached even the royal roads. They call you the divine healer now. A foolish title, but you have earned it."

Gerald stepped aside. Sahir entered and sat near the small table. His hands brushed the wooden surface as if weighing the months that had passed.

"I heard what you did," Sahir continued. "You treated every poor soul who came to your door. You tended the merchants too. Only the nobles escaped your hands because nobles rarely bleed at all."

Gerald prepared tea. When he set the cup before Sahir, he let a faint smile appear.

"I repaid only five hundred gold," Gerald said. "That is all I earned in these months. Wealthy patrons come, but without nobility they cannot afford anything beyond a few visits. Healing is not a rich man's path unless the wounded hold titles."

Sahir lifted his cup. "You say this lightly."

"It takes time to repay what I owe," Gerald said. "My choices are slowing it. But I do not regret healing them."

Sahir watched him for a moment. "Tell me truthfully. How far has your strength reached?"

Gerald leaned back. His expression tightened. “I stopped refining. I do not have the coin for meat. Even the meat of red mouse with the energy in one kilogram of their meat equaling five kilograms of normal meat was the cheapest food for knights. But one kilogram of that meat costs a gold coin. To rise properly, I need nine tons of food. With what I earned, I can barely purchase the equivalent of two tons of equivalent meat.”

His voice grew quieter. “A commoner’s diet would not be allowed for me and rising in the ranks as a knight alone is not enough to earn more sooner. To rise further, I must become a true lord. Without strength, wealth will not come.”

Sahir’s sigh held both resignation and affection. “You speak as if you lowered yourself by living simply. You have not. You only walked the path your own heart accepts. You are headstrong and I do not blame you for it. I was the same at your age.” He paused. “I can bow to the King because our customs demand it. You bow to no one because your will demands it. I respect that.”

Gerald remained silent.

“Your name has spread,” Sahir said. “Nobles searched for your origin. None found a trail. Some think you came from the Azure Coast. They whisper that you were born among thieves and degenerates.”

Gerald’s shoulders dropped slightly. “I am from a far place. That is all.”

Sahir leaned forward. “Tell me something. Is it true there is a continent beyond the ocean? Many sailors speak of an endless wall of beasts in the deep. Creatures taller than mountains. They never cross toward the land. Have you seen them?”

Gerald shook his head. “No.”

But a tremor passed through him. Sahir noticed the subtle shift in his fingers. Gerald’s breath had deepened. The image of a being thousands of meters tall was not myth to a man who understood what kind of strength such a body required. He did not speak the fear, yet it hung in the air.

Sahir let the moment fade.

“I came for another matter,” he said. “The youngborn of House Barrowfield needs treatment. She is the one who introduced you to her patriarch. Why do you avoid her?”

Gerald’s gaze moved toward the window. “My heart stays with one who has already left this world.”

Sahir nodded. No argument followed.

“Then another question,” Sahir said. “Why have you not contacted Timothy or Richard? Both of them ask about you.”

“They follow the path of strength,” Gerald said. “To them, I look like a man who fled from responsibility. A craven.”

Sahir shook his head. “They look up to you more than you think.”

“If they do not look down on me for my nature,” Gerald said, “then I will meet them.”

Sahir stood. “Then it is time. The Barrowfield delegation arrived before me.”

Gerald stepped outside with him. The road was filled with blue horses. Their coats gleamed like tempered steel. Knights in full blue armor sat upon them without a word. The weight of their presence pressed against the quiet street.

House Barrowfield had come.

Gerald exhaled once, steady and controlled. Memories of the past flickered in his eyes. A girl with warm manners. A household that showed him courtesy he had not accepted. He hoped she would not force him into anything. His heart had never left the shadows of his old life.

His body was young, but the man inside had never changed.

He walked forward, knowing that others would expect change from him.

He knew they would not receive it.

As for now, he had to repay the debt of the girl for blaspheming her with his words.

The line of blue horses parted when Gerald stepped forward. Their hooves scraped the stone with rhythmic weight, and the smell of oiled steel filled the air.

One of the riders leaned down. His visor was raised just enough for his eyes to show.

“Are you the healer?” the knight asked. “The one we were sent to find.”

Gerald answered with a calm, even tone. “I am the one you are looking for.”

The armored men exchanged looks. Their commander rode out from the center of the formation. His armor bore deeper shades of blue, marked with the sigil of Barrowfield’s horse-breather lineage. His posture carried the firmness of a man who had spent decades training beneath the plains’ wind.

He studied Gerald for a long moment. His eyes narrowed slightly.

“You feel different,” he said. “Are you the one who healed every village from here to the river? The children, the laborers, the hunters, all of them. Was that truly you?”

Gerald’s gaze drifted to the horses instead of the man. The animals were taller than common horses, their breaths slow and heavy with controlled vitality. Talking to the commander felt like repeating conversations he had already held countless times with grateful villagers and suspicious nobles. He let the knights wait as he observed the beasts.

The commander followed his eyes. “Beautiful, aren’t they? These are not born from the plains. A normal horse cannot reach this size.” He pathed his gauntlet across his mount’s neck. “We feed them our own blood each morning. Knights of Barrowfield carry enough vital energy in the body to raise a simple foal into this creature.”

Gerald nodded. The gesture was small but clear.

The commander continued. “With talent like yours, you could have taken our offer. You could have lived among knights. Why refuse a place that others beg for?”

Gerald did not look away from the horse’s steady breathing. “The one I loved asked me to save lives. That is all she wanted. I do not wish for a different path.”

The commander’s face softened. The knights behind him lowered their heads slightly, acknowledging something they did not speak aloud.

One of them guided a horse forward. “Mount, healer. The lady waits.”

“I cannot ride,” Gerald said.

A hum of confusion moved through the riders. Before anyone asked further, another knight signaled toward a carriage at the rear of the formation. It was finely made, blue lacquer polished until it caught the sun like water.

“You may sit in the carriage then,” he said.

A few younger knights laughed under their breath. Their voices carried a note of contempt, as if a man who refused a saddle lacked the courage to ride beside warriors. Gerald’s face did not shift. His breath remained steady.

Sahir moved before anyone else could speak. He stepped into the carriage and opened the door for Gerald. “Ride with me. I am not interested in showing off today.”

The quiet weight of Sahir’s presence silenced the laughter instantly. Even Barrowfield knights respected a man who carried a vital crystal’s worth of experience in his eyes.

Gerald climbed into the carriage. Sahir sat beside him, closing the door with a soft click.

Outside, the horses arranged themselves in perfect formation. The wheels began to turn. No one spoke. No one mocked. Only the rhythm of hooves, deep and controlled, filled the long road toward House Barrowfield.

Gerald rested his hands on his knees, silent. His body was young, but the heaviness inside him did not shift. He let the world move around him without expectation.

Whatever waited at Barrowfield’s manor, he would endure it just as he endured everything else.

Chapter 16

Gerald stepped down from the wagon and looked up at the fort that towered above the plains. The walls rose twenty meters high and stretched so far that he could not see where stone gave way to horizon. He let out a slow breath and spoke quietly. “A wall of this size is never raised for ordinary danger.”

He walked beneath the gate arch. Every step echoed against stone. His eyes moved over the battlements, the towers, the old grooves where siege fires must have once burned. He said nothing more, but his shoulders carried the silent admission that he should have stood at the frontlines instead of arriving behind them.

Servants guided him into the main hall.

The lord of the house stood waiting. His wife stood beside him with strained eyes. Maria kept her hands folded near her chest, her breathing steady though her fingers trembled. Dickard placed both hands on his mother’s arms when her knees shook.

The lady saw Gerald and rushed toward him without hesitation. She held his arms tightly. Her voice cracked. “Please save my child.”

Lord Barrowfield told her to step back and hold her composure. He spoke firmly, but the guilt that softened his jaw betrayed the struggle beneath his calm. Gerald answered in an even tone. “If he still breathes, I can help him.”

Maria stepped forward as if wishing to speak. Gerald raised a hand calmly. “After the healing, we can speak. Not before.”

The servants carried the small bundle toward the inner room, but Lord Barrowfield touched Gerald’s arm and guided him aside into a narrow corridor lit by torches.

Lord Barrowfield lowered his voice. “Do not attempt anything unnecessary. My son was born weak. Not cursed. Not touched by misfortune. Simply weak by birth.”

Gerald listened in silence, then shifted his gaze toward Maria, who waited near the doorway. He spoke in a quiet tone. “You warn me about your son. Do you not plan to warn me to stay away from your daughter as well.”

Lord Barrowfield followed Gerald’s eyes to Maria. His stance remained unchanged as he answered. “I do not fear for her in that manner. Dignity matters more to me than bloodline strength. My family has enough foundation that seven generations will not fall below the strength of a knight. Her future will not falter because of the man she chooses.”

He met Gerald’s eyes again. “If she chooses you, I will not forbid it. My concern today is only my son.”Gerald replied. “If that is your belief, why did you not feed him raw vitality. It is the quickest way to strengthen an infant.”

The lord drew a slow breath. “Direct vitality would destroy a newborn before the body learns to hold rhythm. I will not gamble with his bones and nerves.”

Gerald nodded. “I understand.”

The lady and Dickard guided him through the corridor toward the child’s room. While they walked, Dickard looked at Gerald with curiosity.

“Why do you not join the royal court,” Dickard asked. “A healer like you could rise quickly.”

Gerald answered with a quiet voice. “I do not enjoy kneeling.”

Dickard allowed a faint smile. “Neither do I. Hence I stay here planning to go the areas of conflicts with tribes.”

The mother looked at Gerald. “If you do not like kneeling, would you join our family as a healer.”

Gerald held her gaze. “I want no entanglement with your daughter.”

Dickard stiffened. His breath roughened, and he looked away sharply. The mother frowned and asked with hurt in her voice, “What fault do you see in her. I am Hannah Barrowfield. I raised her with care. She is diligent and respectful. Why do you look down on her.”

Gerald spoke in a steady tone. “There was someone who cared for me once. Because of her, I do not intend to marry anyone. Even if I were to consider marriage, it would not be with Maria. My heart no longer holds the ability to love. Even in the years when I could have loved someone, Maria would not have been the one I chose.”

The mother stopped walking. Her eyes dimmed, and Dickard pressed his lips together.

They reached the room.

The child lay on soft cloth, breathing weakly, chest rising only a little with each attempt. Gerald knelt beside him and placed his palm on the small ribcage. His healing rhythm flowed like warm water filling every hollow and crack. The infant’s breath grew steadier, and the faint tremble in his limbs faded.

When Gerald stood, the lady stepped forward with a crystal held tightly in both hands. The crystal radiated soft vitality. “Take this. It is the only gift worthy of what you have done.”

Gerald shook his head. “It is too much. I do not heal to take from the rich. I once behaved so when I was young, but I have grown past that.”

The lady’s face tightened as if he had insulted her. She pushed the crystal forward again. Gerald stepped back. Dickard moved quickly, took the crystal from his mother, and pressed it firmly into Gerald’s palm.

“You will take it,” Dickard said in a controlled voice.

There was no room to refuse. Gerald closed his fingers around the crystal.

Lord Barrowfield entered the room and looked at his son. The infant breathed with new strength. Relief softened the corners of the lord's eyes. He looked at Gerald and spoke calmly. "Stay here tonight. You are a guest of my house."

Gerald bowed his head slightly. "I will stay."

The torches flickered, and the room grew quiet except for the infant's soft breathing. Gerald looked at the sleeping child, then at the crystal in his hand. The weight of it felt heavier than stone.

The night ahead would not be a peaceful one, but at least the child would wake to see tomorrow.

Chapter 17

CHAPTER 17 — THE STONE AND THE TABLE

The servants lit the final set of candles before withdrawing, and the long dining hall settled into a quiet illuminated warmth. Gerald Hane took his seat between Sahir and Dickard, the polished wooden table stretched before him like an unbroken path of plates, dishes, and steaming bowls. The scents of roasted meat and thick bone broth rose into the air, and the murmur of the noble house slowed as everyone began to eat.

Gerald tasted the first bite with a measured calm. His shoulders eased a little. The walls of the castle were immense, the ceilings impossibly high, and the distant echo of armored patrols reminded him that the strength of House Barrowfield had been carved over centuries. Sitting here was a strange reprieve. He kept his posture controlled, letting the meal quiet the strain he carried from days of dealing with desperate villagers, greedy young nobles, and the burdens of being titled the divine healer.

Sahir had remained in the reception room earlier, giving Gerald the space he needed. When the older man finally shifted closer, he leaned in with the familiarity of a teacher seeking the truth behind the face of a stubborn student.

“You look whole,” Sahir said, his voice low enough for their side of the table alone. “Is everything well?”

Gerald let a light smile settle on his lips and inclined his head once. The gesture relieved Sahir more than any spoken reassurance would have. The old man placed a hand briefly on Gerald’s shoulder before returning to his plate, content for the moment.

Tonight’s gathering had been arranged to honor Gerald, and the gift the Barrowfields gave him lay in a small wooden box near the lord’s seat. A vitality stone, pure and shimmering faintly beneath its polished surface. It was worth several years of tribute in any frontier village. Compared to the small vitality stone Sahir had once given him during training, this one held far greater impact. Sahir’s stone had raised a man’s strength from five tons to ten, a modest gain of three and a half tons for those trapped between the lowest thresholds. The stone before him was far beyond that, a condensed treasure few nobles ever used directly.

The weight of that gift pressed subtly on Gerald's chest. Gratitude was there, quiet but real. Yet the stone was not meant for him. He was already refining his own path. His body demanded consistency rather than shortcuts. When Sahir pulled slightly closer again, Gerald allowed no hesitation.

He whispered, "Master, I intend to give the vitality stone to you."

Sahir's hand froze midway to his cup. The old man turned, eyes narrowing with a stern disapproval that carried more concern than anger. He shook his head immediately.

"You will not," Sahir whispered back. "You can make up the lack of food by other means, but this is priceless. This belongs in your hand, not mine."

Lord Barrowfield, who had been listening discreetly as old nobles often do, gave a single approving nod.

"Your mentor is right," the lord said, speaking just loud enough for the nearby few. "A lord level human must consume staggering amounts of food to form such a stone. All of it must be refined within his body, turned into pure vitality, and then compressed into condensed essence before it crystallizes. The only other path is to slay a monster of equal rank and purify the heart stone it leaves behind. A refined monster core can only be consumed safely by those at the lord level. What you received is the labor of years sealed into a single object."

Gerald listened. He breathed slowly. Yet the moment the explanation settled across the table, a nauseating realization slid through him. His hand trembled slightly. His jaw locked.

He had eaten purified vitality again and again, the kind that came from human practice rather than monsters. He had assumed it harmless, thinking of it as energy that had been refined by human bodies, not something that still resembled the living flesh of what created it. But Lord Barrowfield had stated it plainly. A vitality stone refined from aa human's energy. A product of human work or the hearts of creatures strong enough to mirror human design. A sense of repulsion coiled in Gerald's stomach.

His breath caught. He lowered his fork. A faint shiver moved across his fingers. He held it back with trained control, but the reaction was seen by both Sahir and Lord Barrowfield.

Sahir leaned close again. “Gerald. What is wrong?”

Gerald steadied his voice. “I feel unwell. I wish to leave for tonight.”

The admission hung in the air. Lady Helena’s gaze sharpened like a drawn blade. She understood instantly. Her expression tightened with offense rather than sympathy.

“Then return my vitality stone,” Helena said from her side of the table, her tone cold. “If you cannot stomach what our house has offered, I will not waste it.”

Her rudeness cut through the polite silence. Gerald reached for the box, passed it back, and Helena accepted it with a smile that held no warmth.

“I did not expect you to be one of those idealists who refuse anything but pure food,” she said. “They say you avoided eating that insect carcass you hunted. That you eat only the meat that fits your personal standards.”

Gerald nodded once. “I eat only the meat. And bone soup if the need arises.”

A low laugh rose from Lord Barrowfield, echoed by Dickard and even Sahir. Maria covered her mouth with her fingertips, unable to hide her amusement. Helena sighed, fingers brushing her forehead.

“This is the first time I have met someone with such fastidiousness,” she said. “My own sister reached noble power but stopped growing because she refused to eat monster meat from lord level creatures. She could not stand the idea of eating insects or monkeys.”

Gerald responded simply. “I may face something similar, but I cannot bring myself to consume food created through human extraction. My senses react as if I am committing cannibalism.”

Helena gave him a long stare before saying, “Did you never drink your mother’s milk as a child, healer?”

Gerald’s face hardened. “I prefer not to speak of that. These are not the same.”

Lord Barrowfield shook his head lightly. “You simply need to grow accustomed to the world. A man must learn to bear the distaste of life.”

The hall quieted after that, plates scraping softly as the noble household continued their meal.

Dickard eventually broke the silence. “Gerald, the royal hunt begins in two weeks. As a free knight, you need not kneel to any noble besides those you choose to serve. Come with us. You look like you need the change.”

Gerald exhaled, letting the offer sit before he answered. “I will come. Life has been repetitive. A hunt may help.”

Sahir snorted. “If you are bored, head for the deserts. You will not stay bored long.”

Lord Barrowfield chuckled. “Or join a frontline war, healer. You might find your answers there.”

Maria looked toward Gerald with a small hopeful expression. Her eyes carried a silent plea. Gerald met her gaze for a moment, then looked away. Helena noticed the exchange and let her gaze fall on Maria, pressing the girl to avert her eyes with nervous obedience. Helena turned back to Gerald with a sigh.

“I will ensure Maria does not trouble you anymore.”

Gerald looked directly at Maria then, and the softness in her gaze turned fragile in an instant.

“I am sorry,” Gerald said. “I cannot love you. I will not hold you close only to hurt you later. You were never mine. I was never yours. It is better to part before we create memories we will regret.”

The words drew the room into a strained quiet. Maria lowered her head. Her eyes reddened, her fingers tightening around her napkin until it trembled.

Helena straightened her posture. “You will receive more gold instead of stones from now on,” she said. “And a proper channel to buy the pure meat you prefer.”

Dickard nodded. “The invitation for the hunt stands.”

Sahir closed his eyes briefly. He let out a tired sigh as he looked at Gerald, as if wondering what kind of student fate had placed in his hands.

The dinner dragged forward in uneasy silence. No one spoke much after that. Plates emptied slowly, candles melted inch by inch, and the shadows in the corners deepened.

When the night finally ended, Gerald stepped out of the hall with a steadiness that did not reach his heart. Behind him, the noble house whispered in quiet concern, amusement, disappointment, and speculative curiosity.

Ahead of him waited the long corridor toward his room, a path marked by flickering light and a simple truth.

Strength was not the only burden he had to carry. Understanding, denial, distaste, and choices weighed just as heavily.

And tonight, each weight settled deeper into his bones.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 — The Breath That Gives No Return

Gerald walked home with a quiet heaviness in his shoulders. The lord's estate had shown him a world of order and strength. Yet the path toward it felt sealed. The walls were beyond him. The battles were beyond him. Even the home he approached seemed smaller than it had in the morning.

Sahir walked beside him until they reached the gate.

"Look at your house," the hunter said. "Does it feel small now?"

Gerald studied the crooked beams and the single window glowing faintly from the hearth. He nodded.

Sahir's voice dropped into a low rhythm. "Do not let yourself be satisfied with anything. A man who stops climbing is already dying."

Gerald did not answer. Sahir left him at the door.

Inside, the cottage felt too still. He placed a hand on the table. The wood was cold. The air was cold. The bed was neatly folded. Nothing had moved since he last walked out.

He said quietly, "Sarah, I am home."

No answer came. Of course none would.

He sat in the chair she used to sit in, the one where she would rest her arms and watch him read. His fingers brushed the backrest. The memories rose and settled into his breath.

Her laughter when he spilled tea.
Her quiet smile when he worked late.
Her hand on his shoulder on the morning she left this world.

His chest tightened. He let the pain pass through him instead of resisting it.

"I walked so far," he whispered, "but I did not find you."

He waited for the ache to fade. It did not. It only softened into a quiet acceptance.

He stood again. The house no longer felt like a place to rest. It was a reminder that he had run out of reasons to live. Even his goal of going home felt beyond his reach.

"I cannot return with this body," he said. "I cannot return with a stable path."

His gaze drifted to the corner where he kept the dried meat he ate sparingly. He felt the slow burn of refining it into strength. It was too slow. At the rate he moved, he would die of age long before he found a way to cross worlds.

He spoke aloud, as if to convince his own heart. “I cannot do it with cow breath. I cannot do it with dog breath. I cannot do it with anything that needs me to eat human remains, insects, or odd organs for rapid refinement.”

The idea twisted his stomach. Insects held concentrated vitality. But he imagined tearing into centipedes, larvae, or grub meat, swallowing their essence to grow stronger. It felt wrong. It felt like cannibalism of another form. A violation of his own identity.

“I will not become a thing that feeds on filth.”

He sat down cross-legged. His breath steadied. His mind settled into the rhythm of a man who had already weighed his life on a scale. He planned to raise his efficiency with more techniques.

“The cuttlefish,” he said. “I can live with that.”

He remembered the creature with perfect clarity. A master of control. A body that shifted shape without losing itself. Its breath was smooth, symmetrical, brilliant in structure. As a biologist, he had always admired its nervous system and patterning.

He closed his eyes and inhaled.

The **Cuttlefish Breath** formed in his mind. His Instant Mastery sensed the pattern and accepted it. His body aligned with the technique the moment he visualized it.

A ripple of warmth flowed down his spine. His muscles relaxed. His bones felt lighter. His nerves sharpened as if they had grown new branches.

He opened his eyes. “I can feel every movement inside me. Every pulse.”

He inhaled again. His breath deepened. His refining efficiency rose sharply.

“Ten times,” he murmured. “I reached ten.”

He remained there, breathing quietly, feeling the change solidify. The mastery felt clean. Precise. Controlled.

He looked toward the window. The forest wind brushed the edge of the curtain. He whispered, “I had given my body rest before I had chosen other breaths as I though there was a path to the zenith. If the stable path will not take me home, then I will walk the dangerous one.”

He did not wait. He sat upright and steadied himself for another breath.

The **Elephant rhythm** was far heavier. He had observed the creature once in his old life. Massive ears. Subsonic calls. Muscles that vibrated with sound.

He inhaled.

Pain crashed through his ribs like blunt claws. His teeth cut into his tongue. His fingers curled without his permission. The rhythm of the beast hammered into him. Pleasure followed, hot and bright, mixing with agony so raw it shook his bones.

His voice trembled. “Again.”

He forced a second inhale. His muscles refused to move. His vision blurred at the edges. Sweat ran down his neck in slow, heavy drops.

His body locked. He could neither fall nor rise. Only breathe.

Then the breath settled.

His mind cleared. A new sense thrummed along his chest.

“Infrasonic communication,” he whispered. “I can hear the air move.”

The refining rhythm surged again. Twelve times. He felt it in his bones.

He wanted to push for a third technique. His body trembled without control. His breath quivered.

“I will try one more.”

He gathered the courage, but the pain took him first. The world tilted sideways. Darkness flooded in.

He collapsed onto his mat, breath soft but steady, body unbroken.

Outside, the early light moved across the ground. Inside, Gerald lay unmoving, wrapped in silence and two foreign rhythms that promised pain, strength, and no return to the life he once knew.